



HAND IN UNLOVABLE HAND

A TogaFuka Mini-Zine




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HOI, FUKAWA!



Y-YES,
BYAKUYA-
SAMA?


CAN YOU
STOP ALL
OF THIS
NONSENSE?



B-BYAKUYA-
SAMA IS
JOKING
RIGHT?

EEEE?!

BYAKUYA-SAMA
CANNOT BE
SERIOUS, RIGHT?!



WHY ARE YOU
EVEN DOING
THIS?

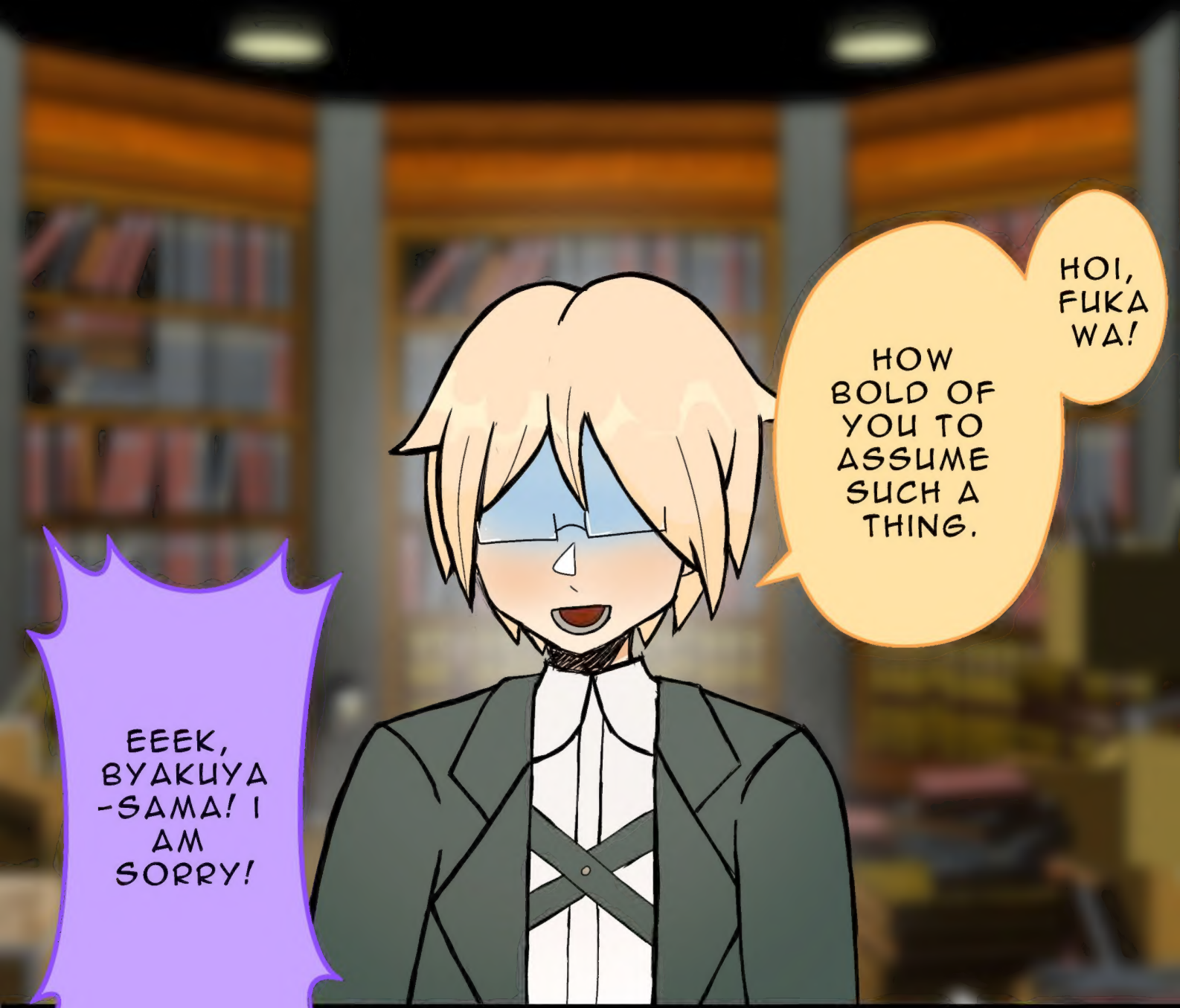
WHERE DID YOU
EVEN GET IT?

IS THIS ONE OF
YOUR OTHER
HOBBIES I HADN'T
BEEN INFORMED
YET?

N-NO!
IT'S
JUST
THAT. . .

I GET THIS FROM
THAT
GAMBLING-ADDICT.

. . . I THINK
BYAKUYA-SAMA
WILL LIKE ME
MORE IF I AM
MORE USEFUL.



EEEK,
BYAKUYA
-SAMA! I
AM
SORRY!

HOW
BOLD OF
YOU TO
ASSUME
SUCH A
THING.

HOI,
FUKA
WA!



FOOL.



IF YOU
REALLY
THINK I
WOULD
DATE YOU
FOR THE
SOLE FACT
THAT YOU
ARE
USEFUL. . .

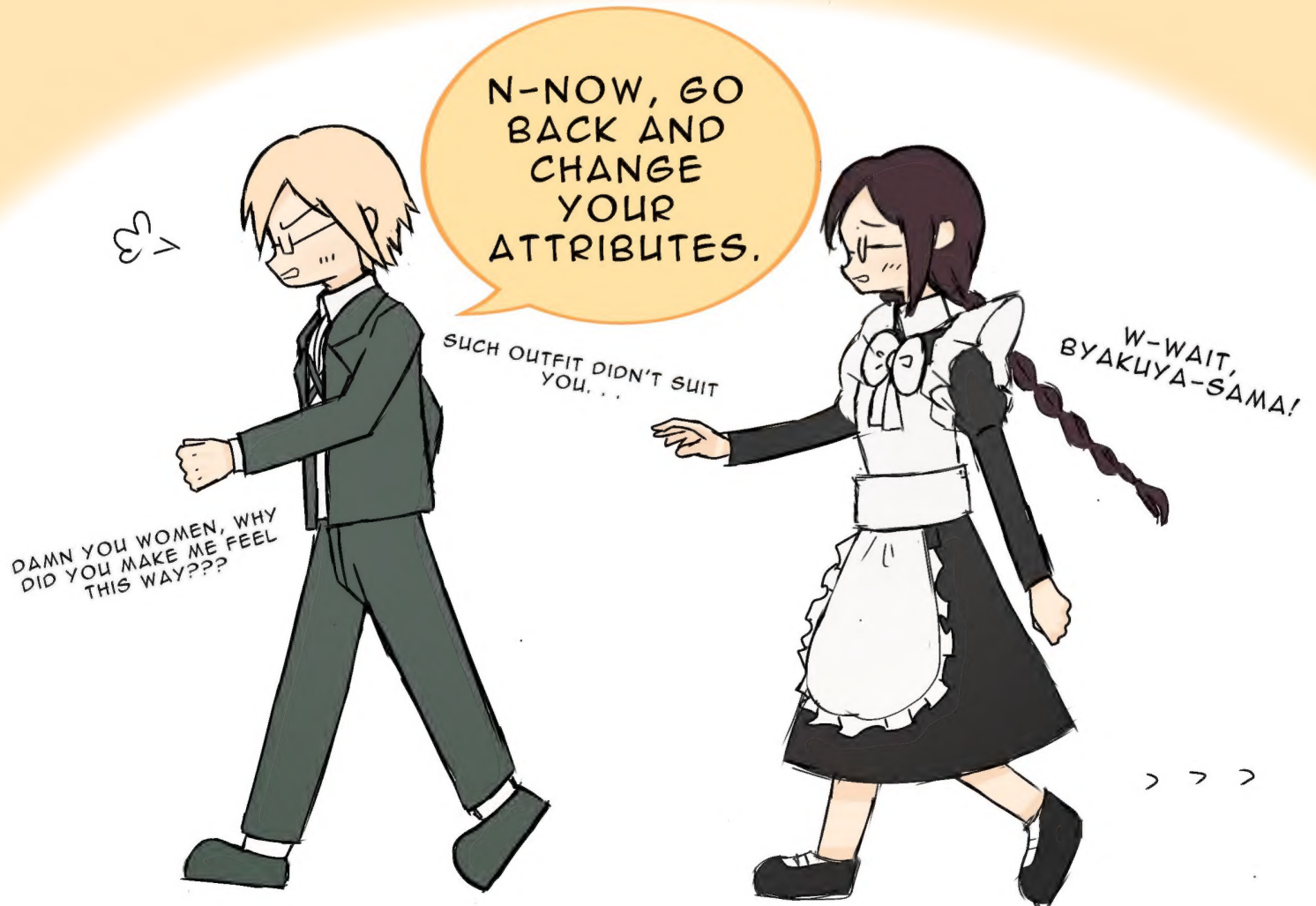
IDIOT.

HUG

...
S-SORRY.

I MIGHT AS WELL
NOT DATE YOU AT
ALL, IF THAT WAS
THE CASE.

GRIP TIGHTER



frogs-willtakeover

A sleek, black Future Foundation-owned helicopter flew across the crimson red sky, above the remnants of Towa City. Togami Byakuya sat inside the helicopter, typing away on his laptop. He had been selected for check-in for the two Foundation members, Fukawa Touko and Naegi Komaru stationed in Towa City. Togami had been selected because of his, well, developing relationship with Fukawa.

During the 77th class killing game at Hope's Peak Academy, their relationship was utterly horrible. Obsessive and toxic. After joining the Future Foundation (Fukawa yet to join), they had more peace of mind to repair. If anything they were dating by public definition but were extremely private about it. Only having their most intimate conversations over the phone due to how far apart they were from each other.

The fluttering noise of the helicopter's blades came to a halt when it landed on the designated helicopter pad. Togami closed the laptop and stored it away. His report would have to continue later anyway.

Stepping out onto the dry and ruined landscape, one of the other Foundation members presented a digital map of where Fukawa and Komaru were located. They changed their location every three months to avoid as much conflict they possibly could. It was necessary to keep moving, finding anything that worked as a shelter to hide from the forces of despair that still lingered in the ruined city.

"I suppose that there are no other means of transportation," Togami said, looking at the screen in front of him. That was a stupid question. Of course, they would have to travel on foot to get to their destination. They had to stay alert and any sound of an engine would set off unwanted attention. The Foundation cared for the Towa City operations but didn't put much into its funding. Fukawa and Komaru were the only ones there. What would be the point in spending more unnecessary money? At least making their rough life ever so slightly more manageable.

No matter how much he complained, it wasn't like Togami was going to get his desired transportation. Taking the hacking gun he went off with the other two Foundation members.

They made their arrival at some old abandoned fabric outlet where Fukawa and Komaru were staying. It was concealed enough behind rubble from previously fallen buildings. Upon first glance, there was a small pile of dirty clothes and blankets and pillows laid out.

Togami sent the other two personnel away and made his way further inside. His grip remained firm on his gun. Who knew if the location was correct or not?

"Togami Byakuya reporting from the fourteenth division of the Future Foundation. Is anyone here?" He called out as turning the corner, being met with the sight of the two he was looking for.

"Oh, there you are Togami-san!" Komaru spoke up first, making her walk over to greet Togami while Touko trailed behind.

"Who should I talk to about the supplies?"

"The personnel outside. They have all the needed details and forms to fill for inquiries."

"Thank you. I won't be too long!" With that Komaru left the building and went to start her conversation. That left Togami and Touko behind.

By any public standards, they would be considered to be in some sort of romantic relationship. Deep down there was genuine adoration for each other. Still, it was hard to express. Only they knew about it (probably Kirigiri too), so there was no way to ask for help. Going into a first relationship blindly was difficult.

"Are you just going to stand there or is my time being wasted?" (The more Byakuya thought of it, he didn't need to be sent so the chance of Kirigiri knowing was higher).

"H-huh? What do y-y-you mean?" Touko finally spoke up, looking up to Byakuya's eyes. She watched them roll and then come closer to her.

Byakuya hugged her, his arms around her upper back and shoulders. He heard Touko make the slightest sound of surprise and then lean her head against his chest. Finally, just a moment to relax, truly relax from their hectic lives.

Byakuya was the first to break the silence after a few minutes.

"Have you at all been taking care of your hair? Even in the academy it was in better condition."

"W-what do you mean?! It's fine..."

Touko moved back slightly to run her hand through her hair, only resulting in it being caught by the base of her neck on a patch of matted hair.

"Well...there aren't exactly luxury hair care products here or s-showers. Even O-omaru's hair is all messed up!"

"Yes, it wasn't brushed but it wasn't matted either. This is ridiculous. Do you have a hairbrush here? And what's your water source?"

"W-well there are a few clean brushes we found and there's running water in the employee washroom." Touko looked down at her hands, one of which was soon grabbed by Byakuya's.

"I have no clue on where either is. Take me to them." Byakuya didn't make any eye contact but Touko couldn't sense any malice behind it. She just nodded and led Byakuya away by his hand.

After setting up, Byakuya was busy combing out the knots in Touko's hair. It was quite the process. Running the cheap comb under the water and then just combing out the knots. Byakuya had some experience from the physical examinations they were given.

Most of the physical examinations took place after leaving Hope's Peak. The memory of the stylist brushing out all of their hair unkempt from their own mental states was still fresh in his mind. It was quite a process, getting over the nightmares. Not like they were completely gone, just less frequent.

"W-why are you doing this for me?" Touko spoke up suddenly, from her hands over her face.

That was certainly a good question. Byakuya did not have to do this for her. Komaru could've been doing it. There he was just brushing it out for her. Doing this useless labour just to slightly improve Touko's quality of life ever so slightly.

In short, he ignored the question. For one the esteemed Byakuya Togami, known for his knowledge didn't have an answer for a question that seemed rather easy. It was so easy but required so much thinking, just like what his relationship with Touko really was.

It truly was more complicated than it looked like it was. Weeks of calling regularly to discuss novels and recent events grew them closer together from where they were. Byakuya didn't feel so strongly for anyone else. Touko's obsessive nature disappeared and that was rather easy to see. With anything, it was better to gain the other sides' opinions and see if they were both feeling the same way. It was just a rather intimate conversation.

"Touko. What is your opinion on the relationship we possess?" It was a hard question to get out, but relieving to not have it inside anymore.

"W-what?" It was odd for Touko to hear something like that. Byakuya asking about the relationship they held together and no one knew the inner working of, only a suspicion it was there.

"I d-don't know." Neither had any experience in a romantic relationship. Just failed attempts or suitors at best.

"We both have t-to agree on something."

Byakuya muttered an apology (something that was already rare enough) and brought the knot out where it could be more visible. To say the least it would be difficult to remove. With many other things, it had interrupted their true feelings and needed to go so they could move on. They wouldn't just let it go this time. If they did, they would just grow old and never have true love. That wasn't an acceptable fate.

"Loan me your scissors for a moment. I need to cut this out."

Touko slowly took one pair of her- no, Syo's scissors out of the case attached to her thigh. The weapons used for several murders and self-defense thankfully didn't have any blood on them. They shone against the faded fluorescent light, the reflection going along them showing how long they were. Easy to puncture a heart on just one swing...good to know.

Byakuya cut the knot out of Touko's hair, examining the small thing before tossing it into the metal garbage can next to them. He handed Touko's scissors back to her. Now they could resume their conversation.

What they wanted to say was there but both were too anxious to say it. Byakuya just worked on her hair while Touko stayed quiet. It was painfully quiet.

"W-what if Omaru comes back in? When will she come in?"

"I'm sure she's eager to spark any sort of interaction. It will take a while, you know that."

"If you think so." In Touko's head, this was like reading a novel that was poorly written and taking too long. "W-what do you think of me?"

She glanced up once again and was met up with Byakuya's eyes. Now nothing was there to disturb them with all the knots brushed out or cut.

"While back at the academy I certainly did not want to be on the same property as you. I suppose knowing you better than anyone on our evening conversations aided the distaste part. Certainly learning more about each other to gain a better understanding has also helped." Byakuya wasn't looking into her eyes, only making short glances while brushing out her hair.

Touko hid her red cheeks behind her hands when he had finished speaking. All of this was almost like a confession. A true one? Was that what it was like to be loved in a romantic sense? She had the other four survivors show their acceptance and Komaru. This time was much different from anything she had felt.

Still, there was the possibility of Touko just thinking too far about it. Maybe they were just platonic feelings and she was getting herself too excited about this. Touko moved her hands back down to her lap, trying to think of a proper sentence in her mess of emotions.

"You went from flustered to looking rather disappointed. Any questions?"

"Y-yeah. I'm p-probably just fooling myself by thinking about it t-too much. Y-you don't actually value me, it's just platonic like it is with everyone else." There was more that Touko wanted to get out but she refrained from it.

"I can't confirm nor deny that. I wouldn't be here taming your rather unwashed and dirty hair when you can do it yourself, would I? Ignoring your subpar efforts to take care of yourself, perhaps there is possibly a middle ground we have reached. We can only observe which direction we move. For the sake of both of us, I wouldn't want to move too fast."

"Y-you're right. I didn't mean to rush...."

Touko trailed off when she felt a pair of lips on her forehead and her cheeks flush red fast. She turned her head around to see Byakuya straightening himself out and the smallest smile while brushing out her hair once again. Touko just hid her red face in her arms, touching the spot on her forehead with her hands.

"W-w-what was that for?!" Looking at Byakuya again, her only given response was a shrug at first.

"It could help you get used to the feeling if that gives you any sort of closure."

Touko's cheeks just flushed even more and she hid in her arms while Byakuya finished up her hair.

Soon enough it was finished, Touko's hair was all brushed out and there was a small pile of purple strands on the floor. Still with red cheeks, Touko checked how it looked in the cracked mirror and ran her hands through it.

"T-thank you." It did feel quite nice to touch her hair normally again and not have her fingers run into what felt like a wall.

Just on time, Komaru walked back into the building where the two were standing.

"Hello! I finished talking about the supplies. Wait, Touko why is your hair wet?"

"S-shut up Omaru!! Why were you taking so long talking to those people? G-giving them extra service to get more of your stupid chocolate?"

"It's not stupid if you like it too!"

Byakuya cut them off with how tired he already was of hearing the two together. How did they even manage themselves?

"If you're done with your pathetic debate I would like to take my leave. This city is sickening and I don't need a migraine hearing you two. At least spare me for what I have to return to."

Byakuya walked out to the front of the building with them, Touko walking considerably closer to him.

To Byakuya's surprise, he could see the helicopter arriving in the distance. He wouldn't have to walk to the helicopter pad almost a kilometer away. Maybe these people were worth something but very that was very unlikely. They were easily replaceable, unlike the people he had slowly grown to respect.

"I will most likely return in a matter of three weeks. If I am sent once again. I certainly hope not. How you two idiots survive on nothing while constantly arguing is quite the feat. Don't expect a formal congratulations. Only the hope you aren't killed, Naegi."

"Yeah, thanks. I hope you don't die as well." Komaru responded rather awkwardly, just looking over to Touko. She never really saw Touko looking embarrassed? It wasn't shy, she wasn't shaking. She looked more relaxed and warm.

Komaru could only really watch as Byakuya moved to stand in front of Touko. He grabbed her arms and placed a second gentle kiss on her forehead. Still slightly wet from the water. It certainly got some interesting reactions from everyone standing there and watching.

"HaAH?!" Of course, Touko had the most, well, embarrassed reaction since she was on the receiving end. So much so that she passed out, resulting in Byakuya spriting off to the helicopter before Syo would front and make a mess out of him.

The helicopter ride was rather silent with Byakuya making the sounds of typing the report on his laptop. The pilot and supply manager asked him about the display of affection and in turn, he threatened to "release information they don't even know about themselves."

Returning to the foundation was painful at best. He had idiots waiting for him in the fourteenth branch. Plus a branch director who was very obviously going to tease him.

"How did your visit to Towa City go?" Kyouko stood at the coffee maker in the break room, obviously not making any effort to hide her smirk.

"Witch. I know why you sent me. Maybe you're too ignorant to ignore my report if you're asking me." Byakuya just rolled his eyes at her and tipped his mug up to his lips. He didn't have to deal with this.

"Do I know why I sent you specifically to check in on Fukawa and Naegi? No, I do not. Perhaps I do. Doesn't explain why your sleeves are wet." Of course Kyouko wouldn't let him go without her round of bullying him.

"I'll have you hung." Byakuya hadn't noticed his sleeves were wet or still partially rolled up for a while. He took his teacup back to his office, finally coming to the conclusion that if Kirigiri had not noticed, he wouldn't have had the chance to speak to Touko truly alone. No chance he was forgiving her though.

Finally returning to the dorms after a labour taxing day Byakuya could rest and forget about everything for a while. The only thing to remember was to call Touko at 8:30 sharp. The line being a recorded one didn't quite stop them from talking about what they wanted. It likely wasn't even being listened to because of the status they held. Either way, it was still rather nice to hear her or see her face on some occasions.

When the time came around, Byakuya stepped into the bedroom and made the call, a little relieved to see Touko there with her cheeks pink. She sat in her familiar spot away from the sleeping Komaru (was she such a child sleeping so early?) and the closest to the strongest connection in the building.

There the two sat, engaging themselves in what they had on their mind. It was mostly talking bad about the people they were stuck working with or shorter conversations about each other.

Despite what had happened, it was nice to see Touko giddy and clean once again, as if nothing bad had ever happened.

"B-Byakuya w-why did you kiss me?" The sentence Touko thought would only exist in her own fantasies was finally out there.

"I suppose I felt the need to. I will have to unfortunately admit I have no direct answer for you. Maybe I do and I need to find the proper words for it. You're quite the rare one, Touko. Which reminds me, did that..alter of yours do anything she wasn't supposed to."

Touko groaned at what Byakuya asked, cringing at what Komaru had told her.

"Y-yes she did! She went on a killing spree o-of those robots and it's made me too tired to write! But that isn't the w-worst part. S-she almost cut the waterline and did so many other things! I-I don't even think she knew what happened! Zm-maybe Omaru didn't tell me the full story..."

As Touko trailed on Byakuya just sat and listened respectfully. Yes, his headache had once again returned but it felt different. He wasn't upset at Touko for going off in her shrill voice, just rather relieved she could go off talking about herself for once (despite his developed fear of what Syo was truly capable of).

Looking at the time it was now 10:00, meaning they had talked well enough. Touko's work was more labour inducing so she was indeed more tired than Byakuya was. Just as he hung up he could hear Touko sneeze before the line cut. It sent shivers down his spine. That thing was capable of running to the foundation if she truly wanted to.

Putting those thoughts to rest, Byakuya changed into his silk pajamas and crawled into his bed. Picking up one of Touko's published novels from his nightstand, he continued reading from where he left off, truly mesmerized by who he had chosen to cherish.







herbleberble

Fukawa's devotion to her Master was absolute. His derision was just a lover's quarrel, his disdain just playing hard to get. To her, he could do no wrong. She would serve him fully and loyally, knowing that in the end, his true feelings would eventually shine through.

But every person has their breaking point. Even her.

Toko's might have been somewhere near rock bottom, but she did have one. And one day she found it during her time interning at the Future Foundation.

It was humiliating, being the only unofficial member from her class while all her the other survivors were welcomed. Every day she cursed her alter ego for holding her back, stuck delivering coffee and files while her Master did things that actually helped the push against despair. But it had its upsides... now, she could serve Byakuya in an official capacity.

Like today. Every day she'd find some way to weasel her way to him regardless of if he was part of that day's tasks or not. Sometimes she'd pretend she'd have a delivery for him only to realize, oops, it must've been for some OTHER Byakuya. Other times she'd be in his area and purposely plan for her route to head by his office on the way back. Most of the time, like this time, she had her go-to excuse: delivering a piping hot cup of coffee to him just the way he liked it, whether he'd asked for it or not. He was always typically grateful for that, even if annoyed by who was delivering it.

Holding the cup's saucer with both hands – why bother if you didn't go the extra mile? – Toko made her way through the 14 th floor. The sound of drudgery surrounded her as people toiled and she navigated the maze of cubicles. On the bright side, she happened to cross Byakuya's path on her way to find him.

On the downside, he was with her.

Who she was wasn't important, just some generic office worker bimbo that Toko wouldn't think twice about in any other situation. The only reason she noticed now was that she was talking to her Master. Close to her Master. A finger pressed against his chest as the two grinned and talked over some unknown topic.

Flirting with her Master.

Now that was something Toko just couldn't abide. If she had was alone, she'd happily tell the stranger to back off her man... but since Master was here, she had to be more discrete. Quick to act, she stepped up niiiice and close, basically wedging herself in and separating the two as she offered up the cup to her beloved. "A-ah... Master! I b-brought you some coffee..."

He practically looked through her the way he narrowed his eyes, annoyance plain on his face. "Mmm. If you hadn't noticed, I'm quite preoccupied at the moment. Make yourself useful and leave it on my desk."

"Uh... who is that?" their coworker interjected.

"No one important."

Togami had said a lot of mean things to her that she'd just brushed off. That one, though, that one stung a little. Still, she ignored it. Normally she'd follow Byakuya's orders to the letter, but this time she felt compelled to keep herself between... whatever was happening here. So she offered up the cup to him once more. "R-r-right... b-but first, maybe you could sample it? S-so I can know if I missed anything?"

Byakuya's eyes brimmed with irritation. "You know you always get it correct." From any other person it might come across as a compliment, but it was apparent he just wanted her to leave already. "I'm sure it's fine. Would you just..."

But it was too late. The damage was done as the office drone grimaced and turned to leave. "You know what? I'm just gonna leave you two to it..."

For a moment, Toko's heart skipped joyfully while the intruder walked off, the writer doing an inner fist pump at her success. Her momentary elation immediately shattered when Byakuya focused on her with crossed arms and utter disdain. "What do you think you're doing?"

"U-um..." Her Master was shrewd. She knew he was already well aware what that was all about. "I-I just..."

"You just ruined a pleasant chat because you're envious. Because despite my numerous insistences to the contrary, you still cling to the hope that there's something here that isn't. Correct?"

She winced. Even delivered relatively politely in his normally haughty tone, his words were like barbs. "N-no, I... um..." Already her mind was abuzz trying to justify everything he was saying. "Ha... I-I may have stepped out of line, but it was for your sake. That girl was probably a g-gold digger, or a brainless bimbo, or a sleazy saleswoman!"

"All of which would be preferable to you." Ouch. "And now we'll never know, because just now you decided to go from a nuisance to a hindrance."

She felt sick. How was she supposed to know protecting him from some floozy would get this reaction? She could fix this. She knew this was just a lover's spat. "W-well... you can still go find her before she escapes. I don't mind sharing if you want a harem, master. I-is that your plan...?"

Byakuya's frown deepened with disgust. It was an expression she was used to, but only now did it really sink in. "I assure you, even if I would ever plan such a thing, it won't include you."

Toko's fingers trembled, the saucer suddenly feeling heavy in her grip before it slipped and hit the floor. He wouldn't even consider her as a side girl. She bit down on her lip even as Byakuya shook his head. "Just clean this up and get out of my sight."

Her face scrunched up and Togami rolled his eyes, clicking his tongue. "Come now... crying is beneath even someone like you."

Too late he realized her face wasn't wrinkled with oncoming tears... but a sneeze.

Achoo!

Togami immediately tensed up – a Fukawa sneeze was the one thing that could break his composure. The absolute last thing this awkward conversation needed was a visit from her.

When Toko lifted her head again, the anguish in her eyes was replaced with the momentary confusion of a person wondering where the heck they'd ended up. And then they sharpened into an almost manic expression as she straightened and looked almost like an entirely different person.

Because she was.

Despite knowing full well Toko presently had the mind of a serial killer, Togami kept his composure, simply drumming his fingers on his arm in irritation. "What an unpleasant surprise. Be a dear and keep yourself in check, I have work to get back to..."

At first, the girl just stared at him. He was waiting for one of her manic laughs or some insane soliloquy... but instead, she grabbed him by the shoulder. "H-Hey...!" Before Togami could protest, he was being whisked away with frightening speed and strength as the intern dragged him towards his office and tossed him in.

Even knowing the odds of her hurting him were incredibly low, a pang of fear pulsed in his heart when she locked the door behind them. Genocide Jack might be eccentric, bloodthirsty, and not care about personal space, but even she'd never lay a finger on him. So the fact she just had was concerning. Her continued silence was MORE concerning. Gritting his teeth, Byakuya addressed her first. "What are you doing?!"

"What are you doing, Richie Rich?"

He blinked. "...Pardon?"

Jack paced, her tongue lolling to and fro as she ranted. "I wake up from my beauty sleep and the first thing I lay my eyes on is you. Normally, that's a treat! Sweeter than any candy! But now it just twists my gut. You did somethin' to the other one, didn't you?"

There was something off about the serial killer... moreso than the obvious, Togami noted. Normally she had an eccentric and carefree air, even as she described horrible deeds. Now... she was cold. Jack was prone to the occasional outburst, but this was different. She had a more muted, focused anger... focused on him, specifically. It chilled him to the core.

It was for that reason the prodigy decided to choose his words more carefully. "How can you know this? You don't share her memories."

"Nope!" Turning to him, her jutted finger felt almost as sharp as her trademark scissors. "But I share her feelings... and right now she's feeling like total crap. And alllll of it is stemming from you, buddy boy."

Despite the accusation, Byakuya stood his ground. "And how is that my problem? It's not my fault she shoved her nose into business that wasn't hers. She acted out of line... she faced the consequences."

"Ohoho, ohoHO..." Jack's braids swung with each shake of her head. "Consequences, huh? I don't know what went down, but maybe it's time Mr. Silver Spoon faced some of his own consequences. You should be ashamed, treating your most loyal follower like trash!"

"My... most loyal follower?" To him, it felt more like his most devoted stalker.

Jack carried on nonetheless. "Who else would serve you on hand and foot if there wasn't a paycheck involved? Who else would make time for you even when the world is ending? Who else knows every freakin' little thing you like in your coffee and is happy to meet your completely stupid standards?"

"I never asked for her to show interest in me!" Togami protested.

"No, but you're damn lucky she does! Any guy would be lucky to have a girl HALF as devoted as she is, and you trod all over her. And why? Because she wasn't born with a gold brick in her mouth? Because she doesn't bathe as much as she should?"

"...That last bit is a valid complaint."

"Well deal with it, because your attitude reeks way more than she does!" she snapped. "You disgust me. You... are... trash! The trashiest trash that ever trashed!"

"Ghh...!" Byakuya recoiled, teeth grit at the outlandish claim. To hear such words from someone a serial killer made his composure falter. He wasn't sure what was worse, her shameless accusations or the fact that somewhere in all of this, she had a point. He might've been just a bit harsh on Toko since he'd seen her affection so negatively. Now it felt like her alter ego was backing him into a corner.

But that might've been because she'd steadily and sneakily stepped into his personal space while he'd thought.

Suddenly face to face with her, he shuddered, pressing back against the wall as she stared straight into his soul. "Something ringing in that bell of yours, ding dong?" she asked, giggling to herself. "That maybe you're taking something for granted? Maybe, just maybe, you're kind of a stuck-up little troll?"

Oh, he wanted to give her a piece of his mind... but it didn't help that his was reeling, and he was feeling gradually more unsafe with her this close. The fact that he might not be protected from her morbid fascination with cute men anymore crossed his mind. "...So what're you going to do? Kill me?" he asked, voice still calm yet terse. "You and I both know that's a terrible idea."

She laughed, like he'd told the funniest joke. "No, I'm not going to kill you. For once, I'm not even gonna threaten to kill someone." She backed off and shrugged. "I'm gonna bring the wuss back and you two are gonna talk it out. This is YOUR problem, not mine. Though I sure wouldn't mind if you were my problem~..."

Togami visibly shuddered at her flirting, opting to ignore it completely while he recomposed himself. "And if I don't?"

She looked him dead in the eye. "Then you're gonna lose something great."

...Would he? He wasn't sure anymore. All he knew that the woman was already lifting her fingers to her nose and wiggling, tickling her nostrils and making them twitch. "Wait..." Byakuya wasn't sure he wanted the other Toko back just yet. Something was seriously wrong when he'd rather have her other half around.

"Nope!" Too bad. She had the time to give him a cheeky grin before her face scrunched and her lips parted. "Ah... ah...!"

CHOO!

When she dipped back up and her expression was much more timid than manic, she looked like a deer caught in headlights – just one with a small bit of snot coming from their nostril. Toko was back, and just as distressed as she'd been before she left.

Togami was torn between his usual disgust and a bit of regret, seeing her like this. He wasn't sure why it bugged him now when it wouldn't have before... all he knew was he wanted it to stop.

But before he could do anything... she ran.

Barely stifled sobs racked the writer as she turned and bolted, unaware of the conversation that'd just gone down and wanting to be alone. She hit the door and pulled... unaware it was locked... and after some awkward fumbling she was out of there. Watching her go, Jack's words echoed in Byakuya's mind.

Then you're gonna lose something great.

Surely her words were nonsense. Why would he take advice from an ex-serial killer? Toko was just a nuisance he'd turned into an asset, someone he tolerated for their service. And yet an unusual feeling settled in his chest... was that what commoners called guilt? ...No, certainly not. And yet, something in him felt obligated to at least keep her from making a scene. For her sake.

"Fukawa, stop."

She didn't stop. She didn't even hesitate. She kept running, and even Byakuya was stunned. She'd never disobeyed him before.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, praying to every deity he knew of that no one was around to witness what he was about to do. But he knew that was wishful thinking. "Toko, wait!" he called, following after her. A Togami chasing after anyone, especially someone like her... how humiliating.

Achoo!

The worst part about living with Toko, Jack decided, was the sudden leaps in perspective. Last time she'd been around, she'd chewed the heck out of her uncaring boy toy in his office. How long had it been since then? Weeks? Months? Who knew? She sure as heck didn't.

When the sneeze had passed, she sniffed and raised her head, doing the usual immediate assessment. She was on a couch. In a pretty nice room.

Oh... and Byakuya was sitting next to her. She stared in surprise. "Oh. Hey~."

Byakuya cleared his throat, a brow cocked. "Hello. Would you be a dear and bring your better half back? We were having a conversation."

Jack fake pouted, wringing her hands with her usual grin on her face. "Awwww, do I have to leave so soon? You know ya love me!"

"I assure you, one hundred percent, I do not. But I do..." He caught himself, the subtlest tinge in his cheeks as he cleared his throat. "I do hold Toko in high regard."

The fact she'd rather kiss that dumb face than hit it meant something must've happened while she was gone. Something good. Once again, affection was beating in her chest instead of anger. "I'm sure you do. Good job, fella."

"...Pardon?"

"Ya know... good job not making everything monumentally worse!" Cackling, she took a moment to catch her breath. "Oh, and for the record, past the obsession and the fantasies and the whole mess of issues in her little head... she loves you. A lot. I can feel it."

The surprising tenderness in her voice left Byakuya both surprised and unnerved – but then he smiled just a tad, nodding. "Noted. Now if you'd be so kind..."

"Yeah, yeah, keep your designer slacks on." With a roll of the eyes and her fingers on her nose, she was once more on her way to being Toko again.

One sneeze later, Toko was wide-eyed and panicking. "D-did she say something stupid?! I'll never forgive her if she embarrassed me...!"

"No, no, nothing of the sort." Byakuya reached out to drape a comforting arm around her shoulder, making the girl blush and lean into him. "Now then, you were saying...?"

"G-good. Um... f-forgive me, Master, I need a bit to recollect my thoughts..."

"Tch. Come now... I said you could call me Byakuya."







lonely-lgbt-writer

Being stuck in a sophisticated, top-notch academy for high schoolers all for the sake of having to participate in a killing game wasn't on everyone's (or rather, anyone's) agenda. Of course, just thinking about someone creating a killing game would easily bring out awkward laughter out of everyone; no one could ever take something so seriously! After all, being able to obtain about sixteen high school students, lock them in a huge high school, have an unseemingly unlimited amount of robotic black-and-white bears that act like the killing game 'coach', provide slim electronics that can keep track of the causes of the students' deaths and all kinds of other details, and not reveal your identity as the mastermind behind the whole thing is scary, but also intimidatingly impressive (mostly scary though). But hey, if a killing game were to be created, it's not like anyone was actually going to kill anyone, right? Clearly, just like in every other action-packed TV show or movie, teamwork and friendship will save the day, right?

At least, that's what the cast of the very first killing game thought before discovering the body of their first victim, with the noticeable pink-colored blood splattered and the face of the deceased lifeless, maybe even a bit peaceful, but more or less, extremely unnerving. And it was this very first murder, along with the first class trial and the first execution (with majority vote falling onto the blackened), that truly set off this killing game. This would be the opening act to everything that would come after the first chapter to this nightmare; this sick 'game' that puts a typical horror novel to bitter shame. This would be the start of further murders, betrayal, and so much more. This would truly be the horrid, heart-stopping (both literally and figuratively) start of what many would know as Danganronpa.

But oddly enough, even in the midst of a killing game, the participants that were forced against their will to be a part of it occasionally had some time to themselves. Time wasn't always spent on constantly being on edge, hoping you wouldn't discover the body of your now dead classmate, having to discover any and all pieces of evidence, endure the class trial, or watching in horror as another classmate of yours gets executed right before your eyes. Just like regular school, there was a thing known as 'Free Time'. And just like how students would have free time in-between classes and during lunch hours, free time could be spent on whatever the students desired the most. Even if it was spent on doing absolutely nothing, the time spent laying around while basking in the peaceful (for once) silence would be well worth it.

Cue to the library on the second floor of Hope's Peak Academy, where a timid, mumbling twin-braided brunette scanned the books on every, single bookshelf. Many outside the killing game and those who were stuck alongside her in the killing game knew her as Toko Fukawa: The Ultimate Writing Prodigy.

Even without knowing why she was there in the first place, it still made sense for her to be in a library. She might just want to read to pass the time; she might want or need some inspiration for an idea or upcoming novel she plans on publishing; she might want or need some motivation to get back into the swing of writing. And to be fair, those were normally the possible reasons as to why she was in a library.

However, in this particular case, she was in the library for an entirely different reason; one that could either be considered as sweetly thoughtful, or disgustingly cliché. She was in the library to read some romance novels; novels that would each give her a different view on and an aspect of love and the overall written love story within. Granted, she already had her own perspective on love as a whole, and how relationships can and are normally portrayed. But she was on an important mission to get even more information on love; to get a better idea as to how two lovers ultimately came together thanks to the work of the powerful red string of fate.

Toko was reading romance novels because she wanted to learn how and why she and Byakuya, her master and new profound love, weren't together yet.

Sure, they hadn't been stuck in this killing game for years upon years (though it could be easily argued that it definitely felt like it), but she couldn't help but let the questions flood through her mind and plague her thoughts. Okay, so he was rich and she wasn't; he was clean and sophisticated and she was disorganized and, for a lack of better words, smelly (she had yet to use a shower). They were absolutely, completely opposite of each other; one was on top of the Earth, and the other was on the bottom of the Earth. One was the equivalent of the finest, most expensive salt known to mankind, and the other was the equivalent of a spice shaker full of off-brand pepper. But regardless of how she could go on and on, wouldn't the saying of, "opposites attract," apply to the two of them then? If that was the case (which, to her, she felt that it should be), then why haven't they had their own romantic rendezvous at this point? What was the hold-up?

Toko wasn't for sure, and neither was she. But no matter what, she was going to read up on as many novels as she could get her trembling hands on, or her name wasn't Toko Fukawa!

"I-I think I-I have enough for n-now..." Toko mumbled to herself, struggling to carry a tall pile of romance novels to the nearby desk. She eventually set it down onto the desk with a grunt before pulling the chair out and sitting down, scooting in towards the desk. "N-No matter how th-thick these books are, a-and no matter how l-long it may take me, i-if it helps me get a better i-idea on my bond wi-with Master, th-then it'll all be worth i-it! I-I just have to take the time t-to study how each l-love story plays out, a-and then Master wi-will f-finally n-notice me. A-And th-then--"

Toko abruptly held her arms and shivered as a quick fantasy involving her and Byakuya flashed in her mind. She would normally let it play out within her mind, but she decided to snap out of it and instead start off with her romance novel mission.

With a wave of determination washing over her, she fumbled with the first novel and began reading the first page of it: *The Fault in Our Clouds*. A classic well-known novel among many hobbyist readers, but a good one for those who enjoy a good romance with some angst. She read the novel in the quickest, but also most effective manner known to her professional title, finishing the novel in record time. She then started the next novel: *The Moon is Also a Rock*. Then it was *Eleanor and Stark*, *Anna and the Italian Kiss*, *To All of Those I've Loved Before*, and even the longtime cliché classic of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Before she knew it, she got through her pile of novels. Once she finished the last one in the pile, she opened up the leathery notebook that she had brought along with her, clicking her pen and writing down her personal analysis on each love story. For someone who's Ultimate Talent revolved around writing, her handwriting wasn't the neatest, but this was mostly because of how fidgety she was. She couldn't control it though; she was always one to fumble and fidget and shift away. Occasionally, she would bite on her thumbnail out of habit while writing, either yanking her thumb away out of pain due to either biting too hard or too much. She would also fidget with a strand of hair or even one of her braids from time to time; she did this out of habit as well, but also whenever she needed to collect her thoughts and take a quick writing break. She made sure to not waste too much time during in-between breaks though, as she made sure to finish all of her notes in a decent amount of time.

"Th-There. I-I've written e-everything down from every n-novel that I-I read... e-every single r-romantic moment, romantic quote, f-first kiss, conflict, a-and everything leading up to the e-ending. I b-basically have every romantic part of e-every novel I've read memorized, s-so looking at the notes sh-should confirm that..." Toko read over all of her written notes, observing and taking in every single detail. Once she was finished, she slightly gasped, biting on her thumbnail again. "H-Huh? W-Wait, wha— wh-what— what is th-this?"

She reread all of her notes again. Twice. Three times. Four times. Five, six, seven, eight, ten, fifteen, thirty, fifty. Even when she reread her notes for what felt like the hundredth time, she couldn't begin to comprehend how all the love stories she read about held the same or very similar situation. It seemed to follow a sort of negotiable formula: The two characters either met somewhere, were already friends, or were even already in a relationship; the two characters then proceeded to go through minor conflicts before coming across the main, more major conflict; the two characters eventually discovered the solution that would seemingly make all of their problems disappear; and finally, the two characters would then have some sort of positive, positively neutral, or bittersweet ending of some kind. End scene. Of course, there was the possibility of some variations depending on the circumstances, but more or less, that was what she had concluded.

So if each love story followed along the lines of the formula she had come up with, then how come she and Byakuya were only at the very first stage? Why hasn't there been any progress yet?

How come her efforts have proved to be fruitless, and how come he's proved to be annoyingly stubborn and resistant? She felt the questions flood her head once more, causing her to place her hands onto her head out of growing distress, her glasses a bit disheveled. The love she read in each novel felt so genuine and sweet, and each story she read eventually came together and ended on some sort of decent note. And yet, here she was, a confused rabbit, wondering why she still hadn't obtained any amount of attention from Byakuya, the luxurious, stubborn fox.

"H-How can this b-be?! D-Damn it all! Th-This is-- This is s-so unfair! Wh-What am I doing wrong? What are we d-doing wrong?" Toko hissed through her teeth, grabbing her braids upon feeling her presence; Toko could tell that Syo was now co-conscious. She started to make plans on creating another pile of romance novels for her to read at the desk when she glanced over at the nearby clock, realizing what time it was. "Sh-Shoot, wh-where did all of the ti-time go?! At this rate, that d-damn black-and-white stuffy wi-will give me a hard time if I-I stay in here any longer. I-I should just make a-another pile and take it to my r-room. I'm s-sure the M-Mickey Mouse bootleg wouldn't mind, s-so long a-as I return them back to the library s-sometime tomorrow..."

Toko sheepishly returned all of the books from her first pile to their appropriate spots before she compiled another new pile. Some of the novels were more thick, which proved to be a slightly bigger struggle, but she was determined to take them all to her room. She began to walk towards the sliding library door to exit when she suddenly felt herself bump into something, or rather, someone. Taking a step back, she peeked over the pile of novels she was holding, her eyes widening and her face immediately heating up once she realized who she had bumped into.

"You may be the Ultimate Writing Prodigy, but even with that pile of books blocking your vision, that still doesn't give you the right to bump into me." Byakuya said sternly, his eyes already piercing daggers into Toko.

"A-Ah, I-I'm so sorry, Master, I-I--" Toko felt her hands turn clammy, her urge to bite her thumbnail increasing.

"What did I tell you about calling me that? Sure, it does fit me, for I possess high worth amongst the Togami family, but you're the last person on Earth that I would want to hear call me that."

"Ri-Right! I'm s-sorry, M-Master Byakuya--"

"That also counts."

"Um, ri-right... um, sorry, Byakuya..."

Byakuya scanned the titles on the spines of Toko's novel pile, resisting the urge to chuckle. "I'm not all too surprised to see that you're a hopeless romantic, but I didn't expect you to be this hopeless."

"I-I--"

"You do realize that we're in a killing game, right? Romance won't save you from potentially getting killed, nor will it spare you if you were to kill someone yourself."

"Kill s-someone?! I-I would never--"

"You know, I first assumed Makoto to be the weak link amongst us, along with Chihiro. However, the more I think about it, the more I realize that you're more fitting of the weak link role than the two of them combined," Byakuya sighed out of annoyance. "Look, I solely came here to grab a book or two before heading to my room for the night. You're already getting on my last nerve, so I'll let you off with one last thing: Indulge in your ridiculous fantasies all you want, Toko. But the reality of it is: None of them will ever come true. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

Silence. Silence wasn't the right answer though; silence only made Byakuya even more aggravated.

"I said: Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

Byakuya was met with silence once again, and before he could raise his tone and firmly stand his ground, he was taken aback by a sudden volcano of novels. Romance novels were thrown up into the air, with some hitting the ceiling, before they rained down, with a few almost falling down onto Byakuya's head. Once all of the novels had landed, Byakuya glared over at the girl.

"What the---?!"

"Why heeellllooo there, dear Master Byakuya! How'd you like my dramatic entrance? I gotta say that it was far better than my very first one back in the second class trial. Oh my gosh, aren't you just a sight for these sore, red eyes?! You haven't changed a damn bit in both good looks and denseness!" Genocide Syo laughed manically.

"What did you just say?! How-- How dare you accuse me of being dense!" Byakuya said.

"Ha, says every dense adorable man out there! What's next? Gonna ask me how exactly you're dense? Or better yet, gonna ask me for a sweet, passionate kiss? Well, I suppose I could fit that into my super tight schedule and--"

"Enough. Monokuma will be making his nightly announcement soon. Make your point clear before I change my mind and leave."

"Jeez, you're a bigger thorn in my ass than usual, Master! Fine, fine. I did front for a reason; that damn loser girl cracked under the stress you were shoving onto her, so now she's gonna consult with some of the others. Anywho and anyway though, I'm here to tell you that you're more dense than a bucket of iridium! How much more dense can you possibly fuckin' get?!"

"Can you please elaborate on how exactly I'm dense? If anything, I think you have that part all mixed up."

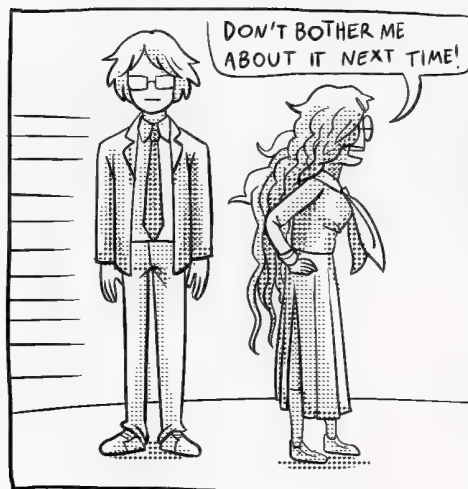
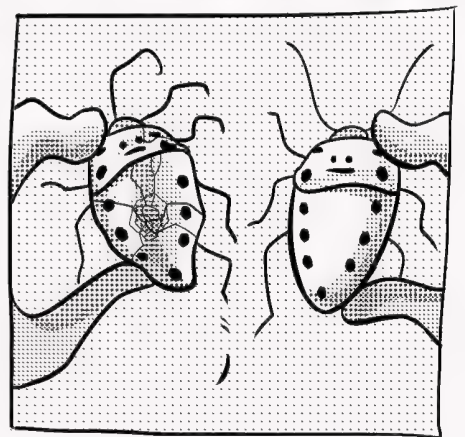
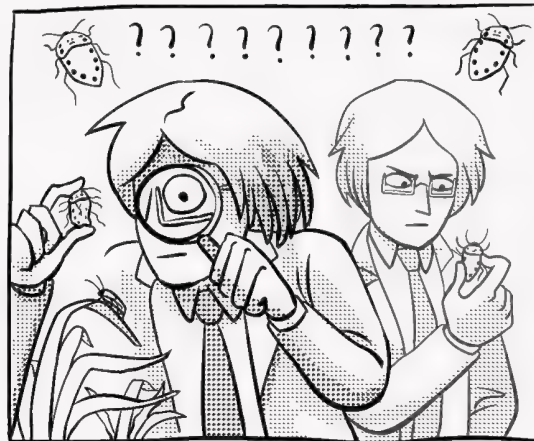
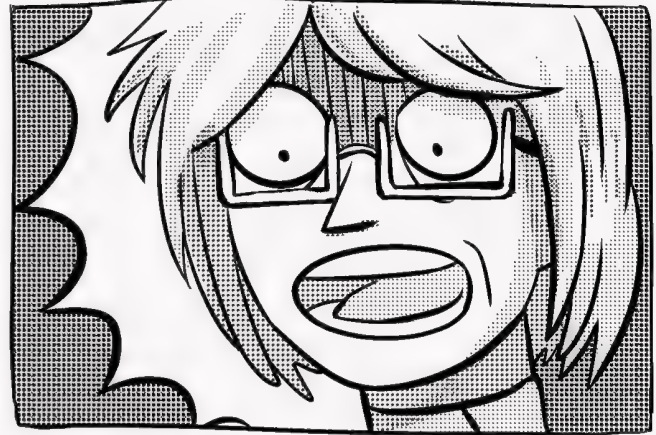
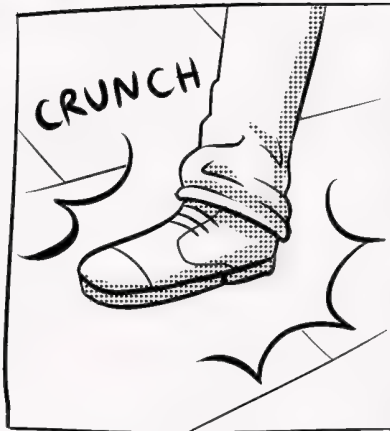
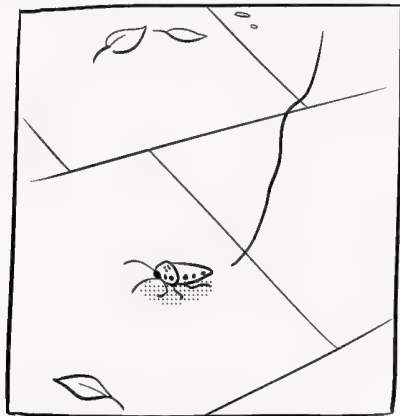
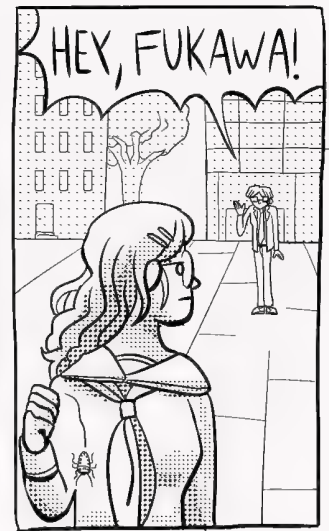
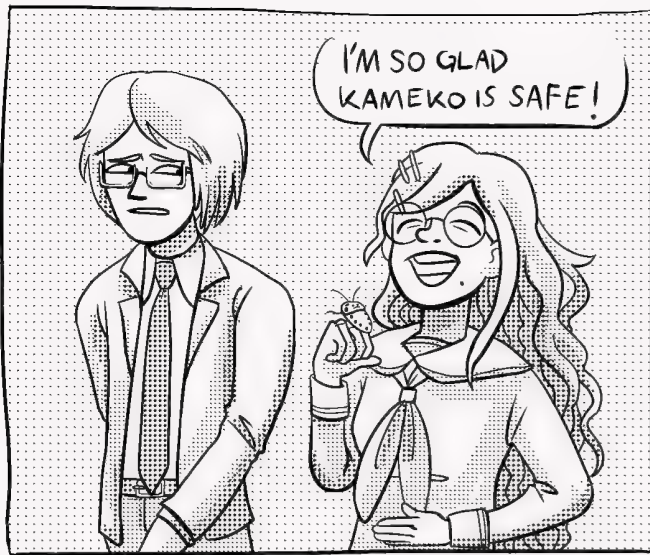
"I'm not gonna spell it out to ya. I don't have the time or the patience. However, I know something that already has it spelled out for ya, soooo here!" Genocide Syo grabbed the notebook and shoved it into Byakuya's hands, grinning with content, her tongue casually hanging out. She swiftly picked up all of the novels off of the floor again, and unlike Toko, had no trouble holding the whole pile of novels. "If anything, I would only be sticking around just to stare at your totally adorable self! Plus, Toko's too stressed for me to trigger her out, so oopsie! But alas, I have a room to go to and some boring ass novels to read. 'Til we meet again, my dearest Master Byakuya!"

And with that, she let out an insane laugh again as she dashed out of the library and towards her room. For a few moments, Byakuya stood in stunned silence, trying to process everything that had just happened. Once he came back to his senses, he decided to further inspect the notebook he was (forcibly) given, opening it and reading through it. As he took his time to flip through the pages, while he became bored at the repetitiveness and clichéness of the love stories, he couldn't help but very faintly admire the attention to detail. He internally commented on the semi-sloppy handwriting, but otherwise, he couldn't help but notice just how dedicated Toko was.

And that's when, near the end of the note-taking, he came upon the final page. In terms of the exact details, he would never tell. But as he read it, he suddenly felt certain feelings he couldn't explain; certain feelings he couldn't quite lay his finger on. Even once he was done reading it, he reread it again, taking in every word. It wasn't until he closed the notebook that he realized the growing warmth in his cheeks. He gently touched one of his cheeks, confused by how and when his face became so warm. And it wasn't until he touched his cheek that he realized just how much his heart was beating. He stared back at the notebook for a few moments, before scoffing to himself.

"Tch, damn you, Toko Fukawa..." Byakuya held the notebook tightly in one hand, deciding he would grab a novel another night. He instead decided to head back to his room, bookless, and as he walked down there, he kept on mumbling to himself: "Damn you... tch, I'll show you 'true love', you... tch... damn you, Toko, damn you..."





potential.a

Toko Fukawa couldn't exactly pinpoint her earliest memory, but she remembered crying a lot. Left alone or yelled at to shut up from a distance. But then, as she grew into a quiet toddler, a gloomy child, and a blood soaked schoolgirl, she learned to be quiet. To shrink in fear under the unnerving gaze of her father and avoid her mothers' ever-changing moods like the plague. And for a while Toko accepted it as her life and what it needed to be. Yet there was never a single moment of terrible realization in regards to her parents for the young woman. She never had one singular instance where she went, "Oh...they don't care how they've hurt me."

Maybe Toko had known, even from her so-called earliest memory, that she was unloved and unwanted by the very people who had brought her into the world. But what good did that slow revelation do now?

Her family was dead.

Before leaving to restart Hope's Peak, Makoto had been less than forthcoming about the details of her family's demise. Something about trying to spare her any further distress after the events of Towa City. Which was a load of absolute horseshit.

She'd seen, first hand, just what kind of world they live in now. She knew that theirs was now a world gorged on madness and despair. A world whose rapid decline only recently started to slow. Toko had dealt with a bloodlust alter for nearly all her life, becoming far too familiar with the feel of blood on her hands from an early age. She had survived a killing game, of which she should've been the first to go if Syo's so-called talent had anything to show for it. She had braved the ruins of Towa City and fought against the twisted psyches of children and adults for weeks. Fighting tooth, nail, and scissor to protect what few people were still precious to her - nothing her family could've gone through could ever compare to that.

So, naturally, she snuck into his old office and took a peek into the nearly binder-sized folder Future Foundation had on her. Slightly thankful that the final killing game threw so much of the organization's operations into a spiral. The young woman had done her best to skip past the packets after packets of information her organization had on her alter's crimes, but Toko would never, not in this life at least, forget the faces of any of Syo's victims. And, after all their stories were said and done, she found it. A single sheet of paper with a printed out email. A shoddy report by all means, but a frank one.

From: Recovery Team (Recovery.Team@Mirai.org)
To: Makoto Naegi (MN@Mirai.org)
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: HPA Survivor Family Status

To Mr. Makoto Naegi

This is a formal report stating that the 5th Survivor (Ms. Toko Fukawa, Birthdate: 3/3/19XX)'s family consisting of one Takeshi Fukawa (Birthdate: 5/8/19XX), an Aiki Kobayashi (Birthdate: 7/18/19XX), and a Yuki Sasaki (Birthdate: 11/20/19XX) have all been terminated as a result of The Tragedy.

An investigation was conducted in which the findings indicate that their deaths came at the hands of two of the fifteen Remnants of Despair - The Former Ultimate Swordswoman, Peko Pekoyama, and The Former Ultimate Yakuza, Fuyuhiko Kuzuryu.

Exact time of death is unknown as decay was in its advanced stages. What remains could be salvaged were incinerated to prevent the spread of disease and vermin. The ashes will be turned over to you at our office's earliest convenience.

Signing off,
Future Foundation
Recovery Team
Branch 12

Really...what had she been expecting? That they would survive? Left something, anything for her? Repent for all the sins they've committed against her? That their end had been peaceful? Easy? Please, Toko was disappointed, if nothing else. Unimpressed by the sheer lack of capability her parents had possessed. She told herself as much as she quickly pocketed the report, returned the giant file to its place in Makoto's dusty filing cabinet, and slipped out of his former office.

Byakuya was a bit on edge. You see, it's been at least a month since Toko and Makoto's sister had gotten out of Towa City and started working for Future Foundation. The pair of them had managed to not only round up all the so-called 'Warriors of Hope' but had also apprehended the particularly unpleasant Haji Towa. And most, if not all of the Monokuma Kids were in custody as Future Foundation's tech department looked into ways to remove their explosive helmets safely. All good things. Steps forward in the world's slow recovery out of despair.

All thanks to the combined efforts of Komaru and Toko.

But that was a whole month ago and, while his and Toko's reunion had been a loud, weeping affair (thanks to Toko) at best and rather snot-filled, bone crushing one (again, courtesy of Toko) at worst, the Ultimate Affluent Prodigy got the sense that Toko was...pulling away from him. Which was unacceptable. Unsatisfactory. This, after all, was the woman who clung to him in and out of her alter and constantly professed her love for him. Not having her do that was...preferable but mildly concerning. Not because he missed her, of course. Byakuya Togami has, never once, missed Toko Fukawa.

Never. Not at all. Not in the least bit.

Rather this new behavior was...unnerving. Yes. A break from her cemented-in norm that clearly indicated that something was wrong. And since Asahina, the older Naegi, and Kyouko were some distance away rebuilding Hope's Peak (and Yasuhiro was just...no), the responsibility to see what was going on in the Writing Prodigy's head was up to him. So, after compiling a list of supplies to send over to the Remnants at Jabberwock Island, Byakuya chose to use his lunch break to find and confront one Toko Fukawa.

It'd be simple. He'd tell her to pull herself out of whatever funk she was in (even though she had no problems whatsoever doing that herself without him, a particularly poisonous voice in his head hissed) and she'd be back to normal. An order by her beloved 'Master' often had that effect, after all.

The best way to find her was to seek out the only other person Toko actually expressed affection for that wasn't a stinkbug - Komaru Naegi. A plain, ordinary girl who became dearly important to Toko during the events of Towa City. The pair of them were severely mismatched but the care they had for each other was...real, genuine. With Toko being all too willing to stay in an apocalyptic city for months just to keep her friend safe and in sight.

Byakuya had been witness to the entirety of that particular dilemma. Locked away in that office storeroom for so long, how could he not focus in on those disembodied voices? But the way the pair spoke, Byakuya almost didn't recognize them. Weepy, trembling Komaru sounded so sure of herself. Albeit in an impractically optimistic way, he supposed. But Toko?

Hearing Toko then was like being doused in cold water.

She was still stuttering and screeching in her usual way, of course. But Byakuya was no fool. He heard the concern dripping from Toko's prickly words, and even recognized the strength it took for her to change so much over the course of fighting the Warriors of Hope. The women had learned from each other and grown from their connection to one another in a way Byakuya had struggled (and still, somewhat, struggles) to understand.

But maybe what really made his stomach drop was the fact that Toko had framed it as something so obvious. Of course she'd stay in a ruined, deadly city. Of course she wouldn't leave Komaru alone.

Of course she'd let Byakuya go.

And she did. She let him go with only a little, half-heartedly dramatic fanfare. Then he was on a helicopter back to Future Foundation, struck silent for once by the fact that he was going back. Going to an approximation of home. And Toko wasn't here. He'd suspected that she came with him to Towa City but...the possibility that he'd be leaving without her was uncalled for.

Byakuya knew she'd be fine. Toko was a resourceful person when it came down to it, and Syo was a mass murderer - you do the math. Eitherway, Toko wasn't a woman who'd ever die easily. So Byakuya wasn't concerned for her, not once, even as he was captured and heard whispers about her and Komaru's escapades throughout Towa City. Toko could, would, and has taken care of herself

Maybe that's why he said what he said. Why he told her his loathing for her would never abate, no matter the distance. It was meant to make her leave him easier, to sever whatever might make her change her mind. Byakuya said it, she reacted like he'd expected, and yet...and yet...tears still veiled her eyes when he left. She stood, firm and resolute, as he left Towa City. Only slightly teary and a bit mournful.

But she never clung to him. Never wailed. And, save for that awkward, sobbing reunion when he and Makoto picked the pair of them up, Byakuya was coming to the startling conclusion that he might not know Toko as well as he thought. Which made something in the Affluent Prodigy's stomach twist.

Eventually, Byakuya was able to find Komaru talking with other entry-level Future Foundation members in a fairly bare breakroom. Hacking gun holstered firmly against her pencil skirt and a cup of coffee with far too much milk in her hands. She looked up from her conversation as he approached, her instincts having been honed to a sharp point after fighting for her life for so long. And immediately her half-smiling mouth took on a sharper feel to it. Like a spike-filled jungle trap masquerading as safe, grassy harbor.

"Komaru."

"Byakuya! To what do I owe this pleasure?" Komaru waved away the other foundation members she'd been talking to, who immediately left the room to give the pair some privacy. The Prodigy assumed that Komaru, by nature, was a friendly girl. And she was. Yet every time she spoke to him there was an edge of side-eyeing to everything she said. It wasn't as extreme as outright distrust. But there was that certain tinge of harsh focus on him that Komaru took up ever since he and Makoto rescued them.

"It's Fukawa, she's been avoiding me." Komoru's delicate eyebrows furrowed as her head tilted at a slight angle.

"Oh? I thought you, of all people, wouldn't mind that." Like her fighting style, Komaru was direct as ever with her barbs. Blinking up at him as if she was right. Which...Which she was.

Definitely. Absolutely. Without a doubt.

"Don't be ridiculous. This is simply a drastic change in her normal behavior which, I had hoped, would concern you." Komaru straightened, and those moss green eyes bore into him with all the subtlety of a fired gun.

"It is unusual, I'll give you that. But, as far as I'm concerned, staying away from you is a good decision on Toko's part." The younger Naegi sipped her cold coffee. "So, who am I to interfere?"

Byakuya went silent.

Staying away from you is a good decision on Toko's part. That's not...No. No, that's not...right. That's wrong, the Affluent Prodigy told himself. That's a lie. He...He helped Toko. Yeah. He helped her gain control of Syo! That had to count for-

Did you? Did you really? That poisonous voice in head question once more, growing more bitter with every word. All you did was taze her my accident and, when Syo appeared and disappeared...you tell her to all but use electroshock therapy to 'control' something, someone that is a genuine part of her. What part of that is, pray tell, helpful?

"Byakuya?"

Encouraging her to fry her brains? Serve as your bodyguard? A woman who barely weighs a hundred pounds? A girl who trusted you with her deadliest secret only to have that trust abused at the earliest convenience for a murder trail? All for your entertainment no less?

"Byakuya."

Oh, please.

You manipulated her. You've been doing so from the beginning. The only reason you're finally hearing your damn conscience, the voice sneered - teeth bared, is because she's not clinging to your side anymore. Stroking your rotten ego. With her forgiveness, her care, her devotion. Her love.

"Byakuya!"

Komaru caught the Ultimate Affluent Prodigy as he swayed, face ice pale. Oh shit. Had she gone too far? She probably went too far. Which was definitely her fault, she knew, but she couldn't help ripping Byakuya a new one then! Toko was her best friend and seeing the way the Prodigy treated her...Komaru hated it. She refused to allow it to go on any longer, and had sworn to put as much of a stop to it as possible.

But, try as Byakuya might to deny it, he was suffering as well. The combined weight of the tragedy, the events of Towa city, and the so-called 'Final Killing Game' have hurt the young man. Komaru was just so fiercely protective of Toko that she forgot that from time to time. No amount of trauma justified his treatment of her, by no means whatsoever, but it kind of, sort of explained it.

The younger Naegi only had a single hand on Prodigy's shoulder and just from that limited contact she could feel the chill on his skin and a thinness to his frame that was, admittedly, concerning. But that glimpse of vulnerability was just that, a lapse. A clink in Toko's White Knight's armor that disappeared just as soon as it arrived.

"I'm fine."

"Byakuya..."

"I said I'm fine Komaru."

With all the steel and frost in Byakuya's voice, it was hard to refuse. So Komaru released his shoulder from her grip and, just like that, it was like nothing had ever happened. The Prodigy straightened his back and suit jacket and stood at his full height. The weight of his gaze not unlike a knife lodged into the hollow of Komaru's throat. She paused, looking away from him for a few moments before she spoke up once more.

"Toko...Toko's been spending time with the Warriors of Hope. Maybe that's why-"

"The Warriors of Hope?!" Byakuya, understandably, looked shocked and slightly appalled at the truth. But Komaru persisted, hoping that some part of Byakuya actually did care for and respect Toko after all they've been through together. After all the blood, death, and despair, could he trust Toko? Did he trust Toko?

Had he ever trusted Toko?

"Yes, they're at the Counseling Center right now I think. On the third fl-" The Affluent Prodigy was already walking out and away. Leaving Komaru alone in the middle of the breakthrough. And, as Komaru stared at the tense line of Byakuya's shoulders, she wondered if she had made the right decision.

The Counseling Center had been Makoto's idea in the wake of the Final Killing Game. He hadn't given a lot of details as to why he was so adamant about setting up its facilities in the massacre's aftermath, but it was fairly obvious that this last game had cut the young man deeper than anything had before.

It was an impressive center, Byakuya supposed. Clean and soft and gentle in nearly every aspect. From its cushioned chairs to its many soundproofed and secure rooms available for use by the Ultimate Psychologist and their small team of associate psychologists. He's heard good things about the work done here. But he didn't know much. He's never made a single appointment with them.

But here he was.

Standing in front of a pale blue sign-in desk with a more-than-slightly intimidated receptionist behind it. Good. Byakuya refused to be here any longer than necessary.

"I'd like to speak with Toko Fukawa." He didn't even bother to wrap up his tone in a pretty bow. Byakuya's voice was far too filled with the demand to produce the author for such things. The receptionist's hands fidgeted and curled into themselves over their computer's keyboard.

"Um...Unfortunately, I can't disclose the people using our services." Byakuya's eyebrow twitched.

"Since I already know she's here, you didn't exactly 'disclose' that, did you?"

"N-No, but-"

"Then I don't see a problem here. No...How about I make it even easier for you? Tell me which room she's in, and I'll talk to her then and there." The Affluent Prodigy was already making his way towards the singular door that sectioned off the offices beyond it. A cheap desk chair clatters as the receptionist frantically stands to put a stop to Byakuya's progress.

"Sir-" The Prodigy fixed the startled receptionist in an icy glare. Was everyone just infuriatingly incopitent today?

"Quickly now, I have something important to discuss with her."

"Then why don't you talk to me about it Mr. Togami?" A new voice yawned in front of Byakuya. And there, standing before the door to the Counseling Center's offices, was the overworked alum of Hope's Peak themselves - The Ultimate Psychologist, Misaki Tachihara. As usual, despite the severe eyebags that hung, dark and low, beneath their eyes, the bright green glint in them was undeniably ironclad.

Paired with a rather sizable height, only slightly undervalued by Tachihara's seemingly permanent slouch, and a shockingly frail frame, the Ultimate Psychologist was a ghostly sort of figure that demanded pause.

But Byakuya Togami was never one to falter.

"Good, you're here." Misaki blinked owlishly, completely unfazed at the snap and crackle of Byakuya's tone.

"That I am, may I help you?" The Prodigy bristed. First Komaru, then that bumbling idiot of a receptionist, and now this lanky coat rack? Just where the hell did these people get the audacity?

Their honesty. From being honest with themselves and others. Something you've never, not once in your life, have ever been. Came that chiding, hissing voice in Byakuya's mind. And though it's words made Byakuya's heart stutter, he refused to let it overwhelm him again.

"For the uptheenth time, I need to speak with Toko Fukawa."

"Why?"

"Why? Why? Because she's been avoiding me, and you, of all people, should be concerned by this clear break in her baseline behavior." Misaki tilted their head, unblinking and unmoving from their post before the door.

"Concerned?"

"Yes! Concerned!"

"Concerned that she's taking a minute for herself after a long series of traumatic events that were thrust upon her, as is her and everyone's right? Or should I be concerned that the one time you've entered the Counseling Center, it's because you're perceiving that someone who constantly expressed a need for you, seemingly no longer needs you?"

Byakuya's jaw snapped shut with a sharp click. No longer needs you. Staying away from you is a good decision. That...That wasn't true. None of what they said was true!

Fukawa needed him.

Yes. Yes, of course she needed him. She needed him at Hope's Peak when all she could do was follow him around like some kind of lovesick spaniel. She needed them as they wandered aimlessly around a despair torn world. She needed him as he climbed ranks within Future Foundation while she just clung to him. In Towa City she...she...

Byakuya left the Counseling Center without a word. The line of his shoulders taut, as if a string was pulled too tightly that snapping would seem a mercy. His mind a raging, roaring mess of needing and not needing. Of loving and not loving.

Of having or losing Toko Fukawa

What happened in Towa City wouldn't end once all the children and adults are freed. Toko even doubted it would even end after the city itself was restored. No. No, the events of Towa City would never end so long as the Warriors of Hope and all their victims still suffered from all manner of nightmare and trauma. Which, as Toko stood in an overly child safe holding room within the Counseling Center, seemed like an impossible point in the future.

Jataro Kemuri sat in the farthest corner of the room on a brightly colored plastic stool. They, now maskless and blonde, hadn't even looked up at Toko's entrance. Opting to just continue coloring on a spiral-bound sketchbook using the box of wax crayons that lay at their feet. At least they had made them change out of that dirty, bloodstained uniform of theirs, Toko thought. But something about the way the medical-wing issued pale blue shirt and trousers fit them made the author feel a little sick to her stomach. After a minute of listening to the young child's frantic scribbling, Toko spoke up.

"D-Do you re-remember me Jataro?" The child didn't even look up from his drawing. Thick golden curls almost veiling the front of his face entirely.

"You're the Big Sis who saved us from that nasty Haiji guy. The one who smelled really bad, like ice cream stuffed with sardines and left outside for too many days." A weird sort of smile tugged at Toko's lips at Jataro's words and she moved closer. The lack of Syo's scissors pressed between her thigh and the Future Foundation-issued pencil skirt was more than a little strange. At her approach, Jataro looked up and Toko was proud of herself for not flinching at the paleness of their face and the deep darkness of their eye bags. Jataro clearly hadn't been doing well. Good. Toko hated small talk like that.

"Tha-That evil man i-is in cus-custody now. S-So are all y-your Monokuma kids." Jataro blinked once, twice before looking back at their drawing. They then switched their colors from a neon orange crayon to a bright red one.

"And are you gonna kill him Big Sis?"

"No, I-"

"Gonna cut out all his guts and string them around while he watches?"

“Or are you going to chop off all his fingers one by one and fry 'em up like hotdogs and make him eat them without any ketchup or mustard?”

“W-We’re not going to do any of that! Besides,” At this, Toko took a seat next to Jataro on the floor so that both their backs were pressed up against that garish yellow wall behind them. Looking out in front of her instead of the little murderer next to her. “That w-won’t make you feel better.”

Jataro stopped coloring and turned towards Toko. A frustrated put taking shape on their face. The grip on their crayon turning their small knuckles white.

“What do you mean it won’t make me feel better? He hates me and I hate him!” Toko couldn’t help but sigh. Really, it was uncanny how similar this kid was to the person, the child, she used to be.

“I used to s-see the boys I loved and k-killed the same way. B-Because they hated m-me and I came h-hated them...killing them shouldn’t have made me feel guilty.” Slowly the frustration on Jataro’s face bled out as they stared at Toko.

At her pale skin from years of being locked in closets. At her eyebags from reading up until dawn, just to prologue the escape novels provided her. Jataro stared at her until she finally turned to him. Gray eyes clear and empty but still somehow soft towards the young child.

Despite everything they’ve done.

“The keyword being ‘shouldn’t have,’ r-right?” Jataro looked away and, without their mask, the embarrassed flush rising to their face was bare for all to see. It was only thanks to the efforts of the Ultimate Psychologist and their team that Jataro didn’t spiral down into a meltdown over the fact that they could be so easily seen and perceived like this.

“...I don’t like my parents.”

“Neither did I.” A slight smile grew on Toko’s face as she looked at Jataro. Who stared at the artwork in their hands for a long moment.

“Did you kill your parents, Big Sis?”

“No.”

“Oh. I did. I trapped my mom in a diorama for weeks and weeks and weeks until all she did was beg and cry and poop herself. But it took me a while to find my dad. He had other kids besides me I think. I dunno though. It’s kinda like a neighborhood dog that always makes puppies but never gives them any milk?”

"I-I see." Toko nodded like she understood. Which wasn't exactly a lie. The thought of killing her own parents had crossed her mind before. She never did, of course. But the memory of prevalence of that thought within Toko's head would be something she would never forget. "Anyway! When I found my dad I tied him to a biiiiiiigggg table and cut his tummy really bad and used what fell out as paint. He lasted a really, really long time before he finally died." The entire time, with every grotesque detail, a shaking sort of grin began to overtake Jataro's bare face. Without that filthy, patchwork mask though, the effect wasn't at all chilling to Toko anymore.

Her parents were dead, like Jataro's. She had hated them all her life, like Jataro. But the guilt was there, in her heart, thick and sluggish but heavy within her all the same. Children are supposed to love their parents. They're supposed to want to do right for him. Jataro and Toko though?

They had never, not once, loved their parents.

"But that didn't m-make you feel any better, d-did it? It didn't make up for a-all the times they forgot t-to feed you or when they h-hit you so hard you saw stars. And you're, w-we're, still hurting from the g-guilt of it all." Jataro's smiled slowly slipped off his face, like a sunny side egg falling off a plate and onto an unforgiving floor. And their expression stilled and their gaze lowered, deep in thought.

"Big Sis, you've killed people before right?"

"...A long time ago, but yeah."

"As many as me?"

"No." The young child blinked once, twice and slowly reached a hand out. Toko tensed, remembering and not yet forgiving of all the death those hands have caused. But Jataro didn't try anything. Instead that small, calloused hand reached out to grasp at her suit jacket. Holding onto tentatively but like a lifeline nonetheless.

"...We're not wrong for hating them though, right?"

"Yeah. Y-Yeah definitely."

A knock resounded on the door, signaling that Toko's time with Jataro would soon be over. Her heart leapt at the throat and only continued to pound harder at the remembrance of the decision she had to make. Jataro froze at the sound and looked at her.

"Are you leaving Big Sis?" Their voice was as nasally and childlike as ever, but there was an unmistakable tremor to it. It hit Toko harder than she thought it would.

So she turned back towards them, towards this child that slaughtered their own parents with a smile and killed countless people in the name of an insane high school girl, and slowly put her equally calloused hand atop Jataro's. Finding that small palm and thin fingers frigid and knobby.

"Yes, b-but I'll b-be back...If you w-w-want me to, t-that is." She felt bare like this. Gutted, almost. Giving someone space like this, a choice was unusual for her, but, if she wanted to help this child, she'd need to get used to doing so quickly. Jataro looked at her, their eyes only a touch more lavender than her own. They seemed to be looking for something in her face, and Toko made herself sit still to be seen.

Terrifying as the idea was.

Eventually, Jataro lowered their gaze, delicate blonde lashes caging his eyes. And Toko had to admit her respect for the Counseling Center in all their work with the Warriors of Hope, with Jataro, for all the progress the children have made. They've come so far from the bloodthirsty and brainwashed puppets they were in Towa City and Toko felt an inkling of a strange sort of pride at the thought. Softly, Jataro responds.

"Ok."

Byakuya could smell the sizzling, grilled vegetables and hear the clattering of dishes from the hallway. But it was the voices, Komaru's loud, unafraid laughter and Toko's stuttering quips, that fueled his anger further. So the Prodigy all but stormed towards the door, all ice-cold fire, and knocked sharply on the entrance of Toko Fukawa's dorm room.

Immediately the clatter and chatter stop. Even the cooking vegetables seem to quiet down. Byakuya gives them one, two heartbeats before announcing himself to a still-closed door.

"Fukawa! I order you to open this door th-" The door opens to reveal Fukawa herself. She's long since changed out of her Future Foundation uniform and now wore a soft-looking gray sweater and a long, pleated skirt underneath. Her long aubergine hair, white not completely clean, was tied cleanly into a low ponytail at the base of her neck.

Her wide circle lenses gleamed as she smiled at him, all easy, oozing affection. And Byakuya couldn't decide what he hated more. The fact that a part of him was relieved by that smile or the guilt he felt in the wake of it. She clasped her hands in front of her, eyes heating and face flushing.

"M-Master! Here?! A my door? Oh, how I've dreamed of the day in which you'd stop by and-"

"Tokii! I'm still here and would appreciate keeping things PG for now!" Immediately Toko's face fell, but stayed flushed at the nickname as she turned around to toss a glare Komaru's way. Byakuya couldn't quite see the young woman yet, nor did he want to. He opened his mouth, intending to pull Toko aside but then she turned back to him. Her face was a little flushed but her smile softer. Welcoming.

Forgiving as usual, Byakuya's anxieties chimed in.

"Would you l-like to come in, Master? I c-can put on a pot of coffee for you." His jaw closed with a click and the young man found himself nodding. Found himself being led into a modest living room with a small dining table near the entrance and a small couch further away.

The kitchen lay next to the dining room and had one Komaru Naegi fussing over a whole pan full of vegetables. Olive green hair tied up high on her head and a simple turtleneck and jeans made the younger Naegi look all the more at home and comfortable within Toko's apartment and by her side. The thought settled like fire ants along Byakuya's skin.

Still, he made it a point to sit down at Toko's dining table and watch her bustle around her small kitchen. Ducking in and out of Komaru's way to make coffee for Byakuya the way only she could, the way he liked above all others.

Back in the first killing game, that had been something the pair had done quite often. When Syo wasn't panting after him or when one of their classmates weren't getting killed, Toko would often leave his side to rush to the kitchen just to bring him a cup of coffee. A few times Byakuya had actually come to the kitchen with her to watch her make it.

At the time he told himself that it was under the guise of keeping an eye on her so that she wouldn't go about killing others. But...it became, admitably, something oddly comforting to watch and be a part of. Toko never moved clumsily and could even be graceful from time to time. Though Byakuya would sooner be skewered by several Monokuma before admitting that aloud.

At last the coffee was done and Toko came back to his side. And the Prodigy was rapidly losing his grip on his earlier anger. Especially as Byakuya took a polite sip of his coffee to find it perfectly to his taste, as if Toko had never left his side once all this time. He swallowed, but dug the heels of his rage in.

"Fukawa, the reason I came here is because I want to discuss your behavior as of late." Toko stopped smiling and something in Byakuya's stomach soured at the sight. Her thin brown knit together and she took a seat in front of him.

"My b-behavior?" She blinked and soon flushed as a saccharine grin spread across her face. "Would Master like to, p-perhaps, p-p-punish me?! Have I been a bad g-"

"Toki! What did I say?" Fussed Komaru once more and she set a pan of grilled vegetables on the oven mate on the table. The smell of chili flakes, garlic, and lemon zest suddenly reminded Byakuya of the fact that he hadn't eaten in some time. But he would be damned if that stopped him from getting to the heart of this matter. The oven dinged, bringing Komaru away as soon as she came.

"No, Fukawa...Rather, I'm just curious as to where you're getting off of avoiding me as of late." The color drained out of Toko's face at the chill in the Prodigy's words.

"A-A-Avoiding! Y-You! I-I would n-never!"

"You have." Byakuya crossed his arms while Toko lowered her head. Something within the Prodigy twisting and rotting further at the sight.

Oh, what a big, strong man! As if exposing her alter against her consent wasn't enough, you have to use her affections against her too? So few people can even stand you Byakuya, must you ruin everything that even has a chance of loving you? Anxiety hissed, rearing his head out of the darkness of the back of Byakuya's mind.

"I-I didn't mean to! I j-just-"

"Oh no Toko. You don't have to explain yourself!" Komaru slammed a tray of baked chicken onto the table between the two. Standing by Toko's side, the younger Naegi still had a smile affixed on her face while her eyes were all warfare.

"Excuse me?" Byakuya huffed, fists clenching against his suit jacket.

"You heard me. Toko doesn't need to explain or report every little thing she does to you. She's her own person!" From her position, Komaru easily looked down on the Prodigy, but what really ignited a bonfire of anger within him was the hand Toko placed on Komaru's arm. Whether to hold her back or comfort her, Byakuya didn't know.

Or care.

"Oh, of course she is!" His volume rose just like his body from the docile chair he'd been sitting on. "Toko Fukawa! The great hero of Towa City doesn't need to explain herself to anyone is it?"

The smile and lightness left Komaru's face with all the swiftness of a plate thrown at the wall. And those green eyes became more and more unlike Makoto's with every passing second. And all Byakuya could feel was ice and his heart in his throat - pounding, pounding, pounding.

He wouldn't, couldn't look at Toko.

"How can you just stand there and say that?! We did what we had to do in Towa City! What we saw...The choices we made...Don't you dare make light of it!"

"Komaru!" Toko cried. She was standing now, a firm grip on her friend's frame.

"Make light of it? I spent weeks catching up on every little escapade the two of you used to glorify yourself in that city. The two of you must have enjoyed it! Your own little adventure where an author with a murderous alter and a boringly ordinary highschool girl could actually be the heroes for once!"

"Byakuya!" Toko was looking at him now. But he couldn't look at her. If he did, some part of him felt like all his rage would leave him. And he needed it.

Or so Byakuya told himself.

"What's wrong with you?! Toko has done nothing but care and protect you since day one, and you've never once treated her nicely. Do you even care?!"

"Care? Care?!"

He was losing it. His breath was fast and he tasted the asphalt and concrete of a collapsed building in his mouth. Komaru broke out of Toko's hold and the two stood neck to neck with one another. His heart screamed in his throat and blood thundering in his ears.

"Do you want to know what I thought about when that building fell on top of me? I thought about her! Alone in a godforsaken city with only a child to look after her and murderous little children at every corner. I was trapped under the rubble for days after but I never stopped-"

Byakuya stopped.

He looked to the left where Toko was. And there she was in a soft gray sweater and a long skirt, crying. Not the pretty, romantic tears she'd occasionally write into her novels. These were big, fat ugly tears that streamed all over her face, despite the frantic hands that tried to wipe them all away. Byakuya had seen Toko cry before, usually because of him, but those were usually out of stress.

These tears were all grief, pure sadness. And so, so very quiet. Byakuya had never seen someone cry so silently, and, immediately, any anger he might've had flew up and away. Karmaru brushed past him to reach for Toko.

But she stepped back.

After a moment, she looked at them. Both of them. Her glasses were skewed and tear-stained. But her gaze was sharp, even under a veil of tears, and cut deeply into the pair.

"Don't!" Her voice cracked like a spine hitting the pavement. Toko turned, glaring at Komaru.

"D-Don't...Don't do that Komaru. Y-You don't need to fi-fight everyone's b-b-battles, and certainly n-not mine." Komaru opened her mouth. "Especially since taking care of each other also means trusting each other to take care of themselves."

The younger Neagi was silent for a moment. Before nodding softly, tears veiled her own eyes as she agreed with her dear friend. Toko let out a small smile in return. And then she turned toward Byakuya and the Prodigy felt his stomach drop to the floor.

You finally admitted it. You stopped lying and admitted how often you think of her. I'd say good job if that was enough, but we both know it's not. She might forgive you right now, but do you really, truly deserve it. No. No, you will never deserve her forgiveness, her love, despite how readily she gives you both. Byakuya swallowed. The soft voice in the back of his head dripping in venom and malice.

But it was right.

Byakuya needed help, he could admit that now in the face of those silent, heart-wrenching tears. Going on like this would be exhausting and terrible and he gazed up at Toko, hurtful.

"B-Byakuya, I'm s-sorry that I've been avoiding y-you. But I've been talking to the Counseling Center about m-m-mentoring Jataro Kemuri, and after my p-parents' death I j-just wanted to-" Komaru and Byakuya flinched.

"They found your parents?" The Prodigy's hands twitched with the urge to touch Toko. To pull her close in some way. He hadn't known, hadn't guessed. Toko nodded with a watery smile.

And just like that, Byakuya was floored. He, himself, had talked big about rebuilding the Togami Empire but the reality of that was beyond daunting to the deepest parts of him. And yet here Toko was, newly orphaned for sure, and already looking to make one wrong thing in the world right. And a Warrior of Hope no less, someone she should hate. The Prodigy felt small then, not hopelessly so though, more akin to staring down all the progress he would need to make to catch up to Toko.

To reach her.

"I'm sorry." It felt like spitting out nettles, and Byakuya had to keep his eyes on the floor, lest he lose all decorum and never completely, but he had to do it.

"B-Byakuya! You don't h-"

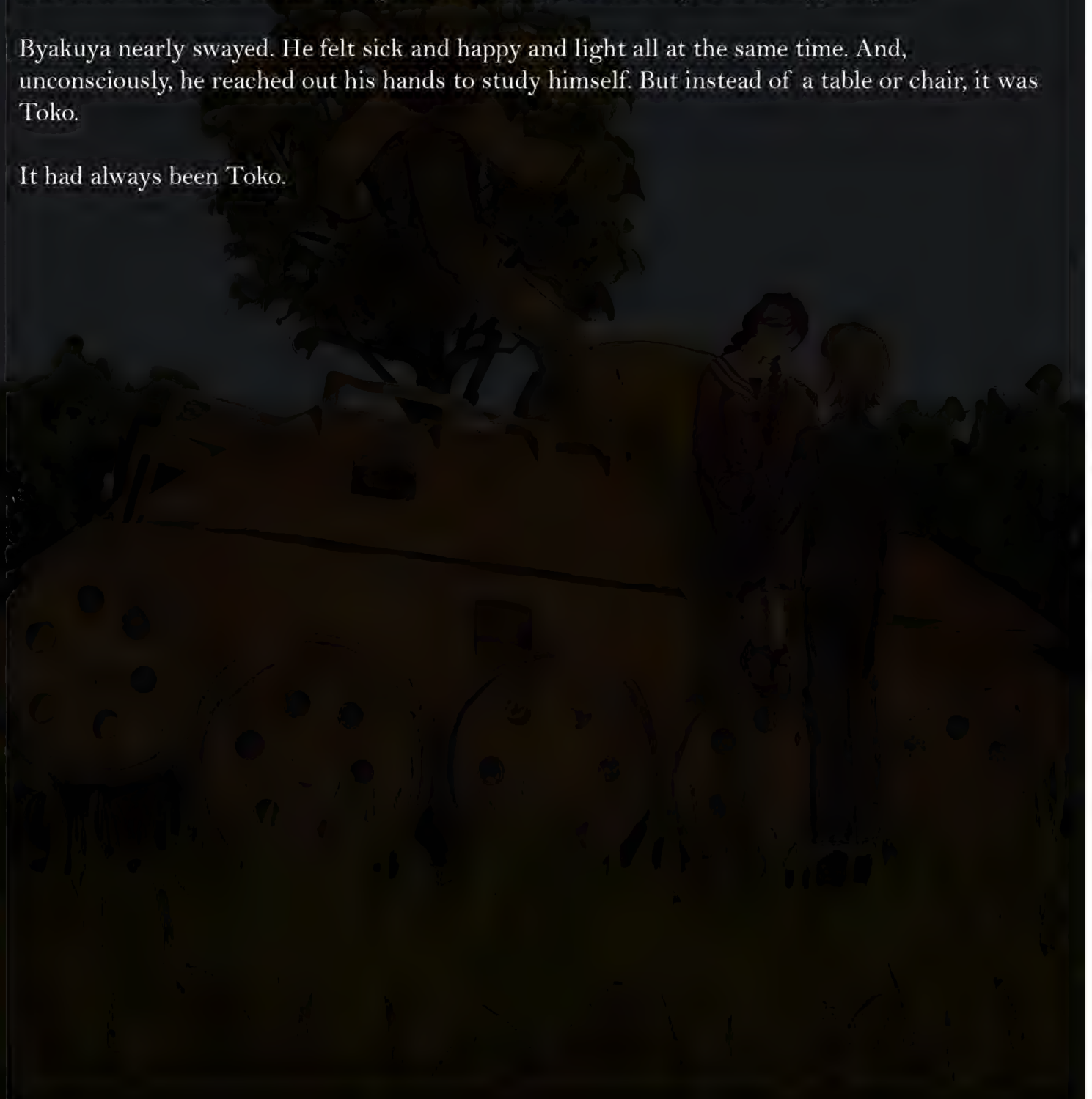
"No, Toko, I do have to apologize. Komaru is right, I have been unfair to you in the past." He looked at her. Eyebags and unwatched hair and eyes alight with hope. And Byakuya held that gaze covitesly. "But that changes today, I swear it."

Komaru finally smiled genuinely and stepped back, allowing Byakuya to draw closer to Toko. And he did. Their gazes never wavering from each other.

"On the Togami name and whatever it still means now, I will try to improve by treating you and, in whatever you decide in regards to Kemuri, I will do my best to support you."

Byakuya nearly swayed. He felt sick and happy and light all at the same time. And, unconsciously, he reached out his hands to study himself. But instead of a table or chair, it was Toko.

It had always been Toko.







irisowari

Toko's phone rang as she walked the streets of Towa City with Komaru by her side, searching for anyone who may need help. She thought it would be a call from Makoto letting her know everyone arrived home safely, and she hated knowing her initial assumption was incorrect.

"What do you m-mean Byakuya isn't with you guys?" Toko replied, panic beginning to settle in her stomach. "How did you l-lose him?!"

She heard Makoto sigh on the other end of the call. "He stayed behind to help someone. He said he would meet us back home soon, but he hasn't answered our calls and it's been hours since we went our separate ways."

Komaru saw Toko's face fall, and Toko was pulled into her side, despite not knowing what had happened. Toko was speechless; she wasn't sure how to respond to the awful news. It wasn't easy to bear.

Toko took a deep breath—in, and then out—and bit her lip. "Just keep me u-updated." Makoto hummed. "Yeah, of course. And let us know if you see him while you're out." Toko hung up the call and broke out of Komaru's grasp. "Master's m-missing. They're going to keep me updated."

Komaru's jaw dropped. "That's awful. I'm... so sorry, Toko. I know how much you care about him."

Toko flinched at Komaru's use of past tense but immediately shook it off. "It'll be okay... hopefully."

Komaru smiled. "Byakuya is strong. I'm sure he'll make it out of this."

Me too, Toko thought. She knew she couldn't be entirely sure, but she remembered the tools the Future Foundation created to fight against the countless Monokumas that came their way. It was easy to survive with those in hand. Maybe Byakuya was just taking a while to arrive home and would be there in no time.

"Yeah," Toko replied. "Let's just keep searching."

Hours passed as Toko and Komaru scavenged the area, coming across a few civilians and helping them to safety. After searching the area a second time and finding no one else, they decided to call it a day and head home.

With this being their last chance to find Byakuya on the way, Toko silently wished they would see him.

She would come to find that she had her hopes up too high when they got home and he was nowhere to be seen.

Toko woke up the next morning with hardly any shut-eye, praying she would receive good news when she stepped through the doors.

She quickly put on her uniform and dashed to her car, pulling out of her driveway. Toko somehow avoided stoplights along the route and parked her car in the nearest spot she could find when she got to the building. She sprinted to the entrance, being met with Makoto and Kyoko chatting with a few security guards. Byakuya, however, was not among the large group of people.

It's early, maybe he won't show up for work for another few minutes, Toko pondered. Though she knew in her head he was always one of the first of the bunch to show up. He would've been there already if Byakuya made it home.

She overheard Kyoko mention sending a group of people from the Future Foundation's sixth division to scout for him, hopefully finding leads to his whereabouts. Toko hoped they could find him, though she didn't feel so sure it would do much since she and Komaru kept an eye out for him the day before.

Toko kept her hopes high, but she was let down once again when they were given several updates that they found nothing on Byakuya. She felt like all of the walls in her head crumbled at the unfortunate news.

She continued to ignore the idea that the man she loved could be dead.

The next few days passed and Byakuya still hadn't returned home. By then, everyone grew worried and became apprehensive about the idea that he could be in peril, though Toko refused to go along with that theory. She knew Byakuya was stronger than that. He wasn't some weakling who couldn't stand a fight. He even fought to become the Togami family heir—not to mention the powerful weapons the Future Foundation built.

Syo, unfortunately, paid a couple of visits. Even though it was out of her control, Toko was angry it had happened. Everyone was kind about it though, and after Toko arrived back, the day continued as normal. Or, at least as normal as it could be without Byakuya there.

Komaru forced Toko out of the Future Foundation headquarters to go to the movie theatre to see a new crime film that had been released a few days before. She wanted to cheer Toko up, even though she was doing just fine thanks to her ability to reject potential negative outcomes. Once they arrive at Toko's house after the movie ends, Toko immediately checked her phone to see if there were any missed calls, but the notification center was empty. Komaru placed a hand on her shoulder, giving her a reassuring smile.

"I'm sure everything will be okay," Komaru told Toko. "Maybe by the end of the week, he'll be home safe and sound."

Toko agreed with her. Seven days without any updates on Byakuya came quick, and everyone began to believe he may not be found alive, even Toko herself. She remembered when Kyoko told Byakuya that 'someone will be waiting for him at home,' and it saddened her that she hadn't been able to welcome him back. She hoped she soon could and everything would return to normal.

That day when Toko arrived for work, she was offered Byakuya's place in the fourteenth division of the Future Foundation until he would return home. As much as she hated to do so, she accepted as there was no one else to work in his place. She still had a few improvements to make with getting Genocider under her control, but it had gotten increasingly better since she left Hope's Peak after the killing game ended.

Her first day in the Future Foundation went smoothly, and Genocider didn't make any appearance, though Toko did sneeze one time and had the entire division on alert. Overall, she enjoyed working for the foundation.

To Toko's dismay, Byakuya didn't show up for work once more, and her hope had already been on the down-low. However, she had a little sliver of hope left in her heart that he would come home.

The next day, he doesn't come home, but she is met with Makoto and Kyoko standing outside the headquarters and running up to her as she's approaching the entrance.

"Toko! We have leads on Byakuya," Makoto said to her, taking a break to catch his breath.

Toko's eyes lit up and her ears perked when she heard Makoto's news. "Really? What did the sixth division find?"

Kyoko looked at the tablet in her hands, pulling up a conversation with a member from the sixth division. "The sixth division picked up on a few pings from Byakuya's tablet over the night. Thankfully, the location has changed slightly with every ping, so Byakuya is either on the move, or someone stole his tablet. But we're thinking it's Byakuya since the location has approached the Future Foundation."

Toko's eyes widened and she finally felt a tingle of hope in her heart after a while. "Th-That's amazing!"

"Last time we checked, his location was just outside of Towa City," Makoto added. "We're expecting him to arrive home tomorrow night. If it's him, of course. To be safe, we're sending out members of the sixth division again to follow the ping."

After Yasuhiro and Aoi showed up and they had a group discussion about the finding, the workday began. Toko had a hard time focusing because of the possibility Byakuya would be home soon. Though Makoto and Kyoko were staying positive, Toko worried that her hopes would be crushed yet another time.

Toko couldn't fall asleep that night. She would check her phone every few minutes to see if she received any updates on Byakuya. She couldn't contain her happiness that she would likely see him the next night, and she wished time would pass by quicker.

She tossed and turned, not being able to fall asleep no matter how hard she tried. Toko wished she could help the sixth division so she could have answers right away to see if it was truly Byakuya.

Eventually, she slowly fell asleep, Byakuya being the only thing on her mind as her eyes shut.

Toko arrived at work the next morning, thinking she would have a hard time doing anything productive since her mind was swarmed with other events. Her mindset changed when she entered the Future Foundation headquarters, seeing a group of sixth division members and Makoto and Kyoko, along with a face she could never forget.

"M-Master! You're back!" Toko exclaimed, running over to greet him. Her heart fluttered with joy to see him back and okay.

Byakuya was disheveled, but he didn't look injured. Yasuhiro and Aoi showed up shortly after, and they too were shocked to see him back.

"What... happened?" Aoi asked, tilting her head. "We thought you..."

Byakuya sighed. "I had to help a group of people before coming back," Byakuya told everyone. "I took them to safety and I started walking back, but I realized I was lost. I ended up in the middle of nowhere and I couldn't remember where I had come from, nor could I use my tablet to get directions back because it ran out of battery. I came across a place where I could stay until I could figure out how to come back and I was able to find someone who knew the general direction back. That's when these commoners found me and we flew home."

Toko's eyes started watering but she quickly blinked the tears away. "I'm so glad you're okay, Master. We were so worried."

"Tell me something I don't know," Byakuya sneered.

"Oh, Toko... since Byakuya's home, it's time for him to return to his seat," Makoto gently said with a look of guilt on his face.

Toko was fine with him going back, and she returned to her status as an intern for the Future Foundation.

Within a few days, everything was normal again. Byakuya quickly made up for the days he missed, though he was told multiple times he could take it slow with catching up on his work. Everyone made plans to spend time together during the weekend, as they wanted to properly celebrate Byakuya's return, even though he complained multiple times that he didn't want to waste his time with commoners. He would never admit that he was happy to make plans, especially if it was with a specific girl that was a part of their group.

They went out for coffee that Saturday morning and they had a fun time chatting with each other and knowing that everyone was safe from the insane events that had taken place a few works before. Being in each other's presence in a calm environment was comfort and reassurance in itself.

After finishing their drinks, they took a walk together in the beautiful, warm, summer weather. Everyone was content to be back together; even Byakuya enjoyed it. For once, Toko was so close to him but he didn't feel annoyed by her. He actually admired her presence at that moment and didn't want her to leave. He noticed his feelings changed toward her drastically while he was away, and he knew of only one thing he could do. As much as he didn't want to take the initiative, he concluded that he should say something. He planned to talk to her before she went home that day.

Hours passed by before he knew it and they met at the Future Foundation headquarters where their vehicles were parked. Everyone exchanged goodbyes, and Byakuya had to catch Toko before she opened her car door.

Toko's eyebrows raised at the acknowledgment, but she quickly responded. "Y-Yes, Master?"

Byakuya refused to make eye contact. He despised that he was doing this in the first place. "There's something vital I need to discuss with you."

Toko fidgeted with the loose strands of her wavy hair. "What is it?"

Byakuya exhaled a breath he didn't realize he was holding. "For the while I was gone, I missed your presence. I was so used to having you around that it felt strange that you weren't with me. Over that time, I realized I have some sort of liking for you. But it's not the same way I feel with my acquaintances—it's more than that. I suppose a romantic attachment is a more accurate way to describe how I feel."

Toko nearly passed out on the spot, but before she could hit the ground, Byakuya caught her and helped her stand.

"Master... you love me?" Toko muttered, a fierce blush creeping up her pale cheeks. "If that's how you describe it, yes," Byakuya admitted.

Toko nearly passed out once more, but she was able to keep herself up this time. "This feels like a dream! Master, pinch me! I need to know this is real!"

Byakuya rolled his eyes. "I'm not going to pinch you, this is real. Anyway, would you like to... be my significant other?"

Toko nodded her head. "Y-Yes! Yes, I'd love to!"

Byakuya smirked. He never expected in a million years that he would have these feelings toward Toko of all people, but he admitted that he was glad he did—and he knew that she would always await his return whenever he was away or lost from home.

2072.





zenonaa

The plaza could have done with more lampposts, but the glow from the few present sufficed to illuminate the origami moths. Their milky wings fluttered in the moonlight bathing the plaza. A murmur of wind proved enough to send the moths soaring, a waft propelling them to barrel midair. Such a sight delayed Byakuya, who stopped to observe the scene on his way back to his room from the library.

No students perched on the rim of the fountain at the centre of the plaza, nor did they sit on any of the benches. Byakuya was alone. He watched a papery insect twirl over to him. Strictly speaking, a breeze pushed it toward him, but most of all, it was chance. Chance that he was there, at this time, by himself, while the performance played out around him. When one of the pale dancers drew close enough, he snatched it out of the air.

It wasn't actually an insect but a sheet of creased paper, tight handwriting nestled between its line markings. His first thought was that this was a rogue class assignment, but within reading a few lines of it, he discovered that it was a page from a fictional work. At first, his expression was blank, but as he progressed through the page, his eyebrows rose. Grabbing more sheets from the air, he attempted to piece together the narrative. Imagery was injected into the prose's veins. In the story, a girl fled because she feared her crush would turn to glass in her hands and shatter. Without context, Byakuya didn't know if this was metaphorical or literal.

Though the love interests changed, the pages featured the same woman, named Koharu. Byakuya didn't know anyone with that name, but he recognised the handwriting. It matched that of a writer who attended the academy. She was in his class, in fact. Her name was Touko Fukawa and she sat behind him in class. At his point, he could have released the pile of papers and let them continue to frolic on the plaza. He had no interest in romance literature and for Touko Fukawa as a person, but he couldn't deny the author's gift with words. In a matter of paragraphs, the writing had crawled beneath his skin and retreated to the back of his head like a stink bug hiding in winter. It had been a while since he had read a work of fiction so compelling.

She had captured his interest, and he wished to see what lurked in the sea of prose.

Lessons weren't compulsory at Hope's Peak and initially, Touko infrequently turned up to them, but then in the third week, they were all instructed to attend for one day. It was then that he rejected her offer of a donut that Aoi had given her - Touko may have poisoned it, after all. Since that day, Touko had begun turning up to class a lot more frequently.

Byakuya plucked the rest of the sheets from the air, and the curtains closed on the scene as he left the plaza, a stack of papers under his armpit.

He didn't say a word to Touko in class the next day, didn't breathe or glance in her direction. When their teacher finally dismissed the class, he stayed behind while most of the other students left, the remainder cleaning up. Touko was not one of them, but she took a painstaking amount of time checking her satchel. His plan had been to follow her out then confront her when they were alone, but she hadn't finished packing when he decided to leave five minutes later. Staying longer would draw too much attention to himself.

After being around so many people, she would probably retire to her room to recuperate. Byakuya could wait for her there. Despite his delay in departing, students were still trickling through the corridor in both directions. None of them paid him attention as he stepped out and joined the flow.

A dozen paces down the corridor, however, he froze. The back of his neck prickled, like he was being watched. Being followed. He glanced back, but the stream of students didn't falter or crash. As he continued through and out of the building, the sensation persisted, but each time he looked over his shoulder, none of the students appeared to be trailing him. Even so, the uneasy feeling remained.

His pace quickened. Rather than head to the dormitories, he weaved between buildings, glided across paths, until he found himself in an open space. The plaza, where he had found the story the previous night. By now, he had lost the crowd. Strewn here and there were students, all engrossed in their own lives, none showing any interest in him.

Yet he couldn't shake the feeling that someone was still spying on him.

For several seconds, the only movement came from stray cherry blossoms that had been late to fall from their trees. Byakuya swept his gaze across the plaza, then barked, "Show yourself!" The sudden exclamation made the other students jump. He ignored them, waiting. After a few more seconds, Touko emerged from behind a tree neighbouring the plaza, her feet dragging with each step. His lips curled with disdain as he folded his arms over his chest.

Her circular-framed glasses sat on her nose, askew, but her hands were busy wringing together instead of fixing their position. Usually, she lurked somewhere behind him, but now he had a full view of her from the front. That wasn't to say he had never looked at her - attacks could originate from behind, and he wasn't a fool.

When her brown loafers stopped a short distance in front of him, he spoke again.

"You were following me, weren't you," he said, not asked.

Her eyes flickered. "I... um..."

"No matter. I wished to speak to you anyway."

"You did?" she repeated dumbly, watching as he opened his satchel. From it, he drew out the story, bound together with a foldback clip.

Upon seeing the tight handwriting crowded between printed jailbars, Touko sprang forward. "T-That's mine!" Touko snatched the stack from his hands and hugged it to her chest. Byakuya regarded her unflinchingly. Her face contorted in part-confusion, part-anger. "How did you...?" "I stumbled upon them last night. They were flying loose around this plaza."

"S-So that's where..." She gritted her teeth. "Yesterday, a group of reserve course students knocked me over while stampeding by. When I was on all fours, fumbling for my glasses, one of them must have stolen my manuscript from my bag..."

Her body shook.

"Then they threw it away," she said, like she was about to vomit. "L-Like trash..."

"I wouldn't refer to your work as trash. There was too much of a romantic focus for my tastes, but I can see why you were scouted for your writing ability." He pushed up his glasses. "What I read actually caught my interest. I would like to read more."

"You want to read my book?" Touko seemed dazed and began looking around. "Where's the scene break that reveals this to be a dream?"

He scowled, but kept his voice level.

"Stop talking nonsense. You will want me to desire a scene break too. I want to read more of your novel. Do you understand that?"

Touko squeaked, nearly dropping the papers as she jolted. "I w-would be happy to show you the breast! Best! Hornoured!" That wasn't a word, but he let it slide. Her shoulders sagged. "B-But I haven't finished it yet, so..."

"When will the next chapter be ready?"

"This weekend, I should -"

"Excellent. I will meet you here on Saturday at two post meridiem. Don't keep me waiting."

Byakuya turned on his heel and headed off.

"Which time zone? Japan Standard Time?" she called after him. He didn't look back, and she babbled, "I will be there, Togami-kun!"

Touko stayed true to her word. Over the course of the next week, Byakuya heard her fervently scribbling in class and he didn't need to check over his shoulder to know what she was writing in such a frenzy. Not schoolwork, that was for sure.

When the next Saturday rolled by, several students were milling about the plaza, but Byakuya gave none a second glance, his focus on the thin girl sitting on a bench by the fountain. Her head was tipped forward, as if she had fallen asleep, and her body was so still that a pink butterfly had landed on her head.

What a nuisance. He stopped in front of her, his hands in his trouser pockets. For a moment, she didn't stir, but then her nose twitched. She sniffed before lifting her head, and the butterfly flew away.

"Togami-kun!" said Touko.

Byakuya reached out his hand. Touko hesitated, then gingerly touched her fingers against his palm. He retracted his hand with a jerk.

"What are you doing?" he snapped. "I want you to give me the next chapter."

A yelp tore through her, twitching her body. She rummaged in her satchel until she found what she wanted and extracted a notebook. He took it from her and remained standing as he started reading.

Neither spoke while he waded through her cramped handwriting. At first, her gaze clung to him like grime, but as he journeyed further into her manuscript, her stare turned to glitter and he almost forgot about her. Around them, butterflies became paint strokes, footfall faded and conversations turned to cadence. In this chapter, Koharu was trapped in a glass castle, fumbling her way through and bumping into invisible walls. Beneath her feet loomed the abyss, a gaping mouth whose throat never ended. During her escape attempt, a shadowy figure swam through the walls in chase, and at the conclusion of the chapter, the stranger properly introduced himself. Haruto.

When Byakuya looked up from the last paragraph on the last page, Touko was biting her nails. He grimaced.

"W-What did you think?" she asked.

"There are descriptions contained in this that invoke powerful imagery." Byakuya flicked back through to find a particular passage, then read aloud, "Each breath lacerates my throat. The blood in my mouth climbs to my eyes as I stagger, sob and stumble."

She freed her nails from her teeth and dropped her hand to her heart, oozing a smile. "T-Thank you, Togami-kun!"

"I would be interested in reading the rest," he said. "When can you have it done?"

"I have a lot of projects g-going on, and I would like to read over my novel again before I finalise the ending, but..."

"Be here next week," he interrupted. "I will read whatever you have produced in that time."

"Yes, of course!" she said. Byakuya walked off. "G-Goodbye, Togami-kun!"

Over the next months, the only weeks they didn't meet in person at the plaza were when Byakuya left the country for a vacation. Even then, he instructed her to email him her progress, and once he returned, they resumed their meetings in person.

Summer's temperatures cooled. Green foliage turned into radiant reds, yellows and browns, and all the shades in between. Byakuya's boots crunched autumn leaves as he crossed the plaza. Other than him and Touko, there were only half a dozen students scattered about. As usual, she had arrived before him, and today she was reading as she waited for him. When he was close enough, he caught sight of the cover and quirked his brow.

"Battle Royale?" he remarked. "That's not the sort of genre that I would expect from you."

"It is true that I'm most known for my romance novels, but I try to keep my reading library diverse," she explained. "Admittedly, I w-was tempted to give up on this book. It has a feel of anime to it. A lot of information is dumped rather than woven in with the plot, and many of the characters are forgettable and one-dimensional... and don't get me started on the mediocre romance, if it can be called that. But it's useful to read successful novels even if you don't love them, and... one character in particular. Kazuo Kiriya..."

Byakuya stared at her calmly.

"... reminds you of Izuru Kamukura?" finished Byakuya.

"Yes." Her teeth scraped against her chapped lips. "This novel provides an interesting look into the psyches of different characters, and society as a whole, and what could drive people to murder. Though, unlike what happened here, the students in the novel slaughtered each other, and it wasn't the work of one individual..."

The story that the academy gave was that the student council had left to study abroad at an overseas facility, but the reserve course students claimed the academy had created a murderer who killed all of them. For those that believed the reserve course students, the air reeked of blood despite how the bodies of the student council had been cleared away. Some claimed to feel a chill, imagined rumoured red eyes at the edge of their vision and held their breaths when they spotted shadows that resembled curtains of hair.

He didn't let this supposed murderer intimidate him. Neither did Touko, it seemed, unless she believed the academy's claim. But he doubted that. She wasn't stupid. Her desire to continue these meetings outweighed her fear of the murderer.

"This Kamukura person doesn't particularly intrigue me," he said. "Don't misconstrue. I am wary - he murdered our student council, after all. But there exist powerful entities with much more disturbing secrets. He sounds like a puppet having his strings pulled by the academy, and they would be foolish to try to kill me."

Byakuya was the elite of the elite. Heir to the powerful, formidable Togami family. He was unkillable. If he had been killable, he would have died long ago from poisoning, or a kidnapping, or an assassination. But each of those attempts had failed to defeat him.

"Now, Genocider Syo..." Byakuya stroked his chin. "That's someone who intrigues me." Of the many cold cases he had perused, the case by Genocider Syo routinely drew him back. The signature scissors. How he fitted the killer's type of victim. The bloody message on the wall. The depravity, the shamelessness. The skill. In a way, he admired the serial killer. Meanwhile, the mere mention of the name made Touko's face turn queasy.

"Yes..." she mumbled, trailing off, then she gasped, louder than needed, her shoulders bouncing as she clapped a hand to her heart. "Ah! I've d-distracted you from the reason you're here. Please... feel free to spank my behind as punishment for my insolence!"

Byakuya glowered. Of course she had to spoil their conversation with that nonsense.

"Stop that. But I suppose you're right. I allowed you to take us off-topic." They could discuss novels and serial killers another time. He unclasped his satchel, and added stiffly, "I finished your novel."

"What did you think of it?" she asked, her gaze digging claws into him as he pulled out a stack of papers clipped together.

"The plot is well-constructed, and there are many passages where the narration and description shine," he replied. "Despite the focus on romance, I enjoyed it."

He had enjoyed it enough to read it in his room long after the sky turned black and the only sounds to be heard were the rustle of pages turning. A gleam passed over her eyes, but soon the ends of her mouth dipped and she fiddled with her fingers.

"M-Many..." she said. "Not... all?"

"In places, there are words that I feel can be substituted for another, and sentences that could be reworked. Some of your descriptions feel too abstract, and there are a few questions that I have about the plot."

Touko nodded along to what he said.

"If you would like, I can go over them with you," he told her.

"O-Of course!" She shuddered with delight and squeezed her hands together tightly. "I would be h-happy to...!"

Byakuya plonked himself down next to her.

"Excellent. Let's start at the beginning of the book." He took out a pen from his shirt pocket and pointed it at the first paragraph on the top page. "Instead of 'there are glass shards splintering my hands', I suggest, 'Glass shards splinter my hands.'"

"Yes, I like that," said Touko. He positioned the papers so they were between him and her, then pointed slightly further down the page.

"And here, I would edit the paragraph so you have the word 'large' only appearing once, if at all."

Touko took the pen from him and scribbled on her manuscript. "Yes, yes. I can do that."

By the time they sifted through the second chapter, red annotations were spread across the pages and they were alone, reading by the torch on Byakuya's phone. He leaned back and adjusted his glasses, which seemed to signal to Touko that they were done, because she scrunched her face and rubbed her eyes.

"Let us resume next week," he said.

However, instead of leaving their conversation right then and there and striding off, Byakuya lingered.

"Tell me when you finish Battle Royale," he said. "I have read it, and perhaps we could discuss it before one of our meetings."

Touko's smile stretched across her face. "I would love to!"

During their next dozen sessions, they toiled away on the novel. Byakuya combed through Touko's prose, cutting out words, adding in others, asking Touko to elaborate on some points and snip out paragraphs. She would grind through it during class too - whenever he peeked over his shoulder, he saw her scratching her pen nib against her notebook rather than staring at the back of his head.

They were more than halfway through the first round of edits when snow splattered against the plaza, filling the air with its mutterings. Beyond the rush of wind tousling his hair, Byakuya could hear the distant rumble of voices and stomping. He knew they belonged to the parade of reserve course students making their daily rounds around the school grounds. Not even the weather seemed to deter them. From here, he couldn't see them, but he had glimpsed them on previous occasions, a sea of students decked in black, all the same, chanting in sync, marching in sync.

Byakuya halted at the bench that he and Touko had occupied so many times together, then realised she was not there. Her absence caught him off-guard. This was the first time he had arrived before her. He plucked his pocket watch from his peacoat and confirmed that he wasn't too early.

Fifteen minutes. That wasn't too early. They would probably have to retreat inside so the snow wouldn't bother them, but that involved him meeting up with her first. Byakuya hoped she would be here soon because before they started work, he wanted to discuss the crime novel that she had suggested to him the previous week. So far, her recommendations had been surprisingly thoughtful, and they had started many sessions with a stimulating discussion. He was already imagining the debate they would have about the last section of the novel, about how needlessly graphic it was and whether the gratuitous violence undermined the novel's feminist message. But she wasn't here, and then ten minutes passed, and another ten, and she still wasn't here. Touko had never been late before. His jaw clenched in indignation and grasping the front of his coat, he headed toward the dormitories. Snow dusted his shoulders, nestled in his hair as he strode through the building's doors and climbed the stairs. The nerve of Touko, not bothering to show up. He arrived in front of Touko's door and pressed his finger against the doorbell.

No response.

"Fukawa," he said.

Though quiet, he heard a gasp on the other side of the door.

"I know you're in there," he said.

A few beats of silence passed. Then there were footsteps and the door cracked ajar, revealing a sliver of Touko's face as she peeked out through the gap.

"Explain yourself," he said. "I was waiting approximately forty-five minutes in the plaza." Her brow furrowed as she lowered her eyes.

"Sorry," she mumbled.

"Did you oversleep?"

She shook her head. He folded his arms over his chest, refusing to budge.

"I... I didn't want to waste more of your time," she explained, hushed.

"Waste...?" Byakuya was confused. "What do you mean?"

"W-While we were editing my manuscript together, we had to c-correct so many passages. I didn't want to waste your time fixing a piece of work that was so imperfect and riddled with flaws..."

Touko wouldn't look him in the eyes. Byakuya placed a hand onto one of her trembling shoulders and felt her tense.

"Your work before the edits was fine," he said. "Most of my suggestions were concerned with minor alterations. I know potential and a lost cause when I see them. Indeed, my own creation was a business venture by my father. Think of your writing as a meal... it is fine by itself, great, even, but my input is seasoning. It may improve it. I may be offering a different perspective that is not necessarily better, or even worse. What I recommend may not be to your tastes. Regardless, I could never create such a recipe as you had on my own..."

She didn't say a word, staring at him with her mouth hanging open. He maintained eye contact for several more seconds before he shifted his weight between feet and averted his gaze, fighting back a pout.

"... I will leave the similes and metaphors to you," he said. "I never claimed to be a professional. You are the wordsmith."

Byakuya forced his gaze back onto her. She was still gawking at him. He heaved a sigh.

"We have wasted enough time, so I suppose we will have to have today's session here," he said. While he spoke, she had nodded along, and she bobbed her head a few more times after he stopped talking. Then what he had said sank in, and she twitched.

"Here?" she squeaked.

"So long as your room doesn't stink, and there are no rats scuttling around our feet," he replied. He brought a hand in front of himself and wafted it side-to-side. "Move."

Touko pulled the door toward herself and stepped back. The avalanche of sweaty stink that he anticipated never fell upon him. Actually, the room smelled rather pleasant, and as he proceeded further in, he realised why. Incense burned on a coffee table, giving off an earthy, spicy aroma. Probably myrrh.

While Touko walked in ahead, he cast his gaze toward a desk swamped in piles of papers.

Byakuya shook his head. "That's not quite what I'm getting at. Yes, Haruto is and does those things, and he is clever and hard-working also. But why does Koharu pursue Haruto romantically when he shows little interest in her?"

"Ah, but he does," said Touko, smirking slightly. "She would want to be by his side regardless, but in this case, he does show interest in her. If... If he wasn't interested in her, he wouldn't visit her so frequently. He has no reason to, yet he does, and he takes interest in her. His visits grow longer, and they don't only talk about the curse, but about themselves too..."

"But why is he interested in her?" he said impatiently.

Touko breathed in. Sat up straighter.

"Once we reach the end of the novel, ask me again," she said.

"But I've read the end already."

"Trust me."

Byakuya squinted at her. This was the closest that she had come to talking back to him, and normally, if another person didn't concede to his demands, he would become angry. Instead, he was intrigued, and he said, "All right."

Over the next weeks, they worked on the story together, sitting on a bench at the plaza, chipping away until they finally finished. Overhead, the red sky wept silver, its tears clinging to the umbrella that Byakuya and Touko were underneath. In fact, its tears stuck to everything. The umbrella, the broken slabs, the bone dry fountain. Byakuya held the umbrella while Touko's arms were wrapped around herself.

"... At this point, any more edits would be frivolous," he said. "A line must be drawn, and so..."

"... it's complete?" she finished for him.

"Yes. I was about to say that."

Rather than seem pleased, she seemed to sag.

"You don't appear enthused," he remarked. "This is an accomplishment."

"I am. I mean..." She wilted more under his unyielding gaze. "I enjoyed spending time with you. A lot. And now... the novel is done..."

"We'll be spending plenty of time together soon enough," he said. "I won't have a choice. You know, when we..."

Understanding, she nodded. They were quiet for a bit. Byakuya looked at her again. She wasn't the only one who had grown fond of their meetings. These days, it was one of the few things he had to look forward to.

"How about we work on another novel together?" he suggested. Touko jolted. "T-Together?"

Byakuya pointed his index finger at her. "Not a romance." His hand descended to his lap. "I was considering a mystery novel. I've solved several cold cases, and together with your writing ability, we will create a masterpiece."

The shock on her face melted into a wide grin.

"Yes! I would love to!" she said, fidgeting her hands together. "Finally, some light in this twisted situation."

Her eyes glazed over. Before she could drift into a daydream, he cut in.

"Don't misunderstand," he said. "Even if circumstances were different, and I was free to go wherever I wished, I would still make this proposition to you."

Touko's mouth popped open, but no sound came out. She continued staring at him, and in the end, he turned away first, feeling his face warm.

"We should get going." He rose from the bench. "I'm not in the mood to listen to Ishimaru complain that we aren't helping with setting up the shelter. And if we're late, we might end up in a group with Hagakure."

"That idiot," she grumbled. "He's the sort of guy who would build a treehouse from the inside and forget to include a door."

Byakuya smirked in agreement. The movement of his lips was small, but it was enough to make her smile widely. Together, they walked through the rain of ash spilling from the sky.

"Byakuya-sama?"

Her calling him that had started before the Togami name lost its meaning, before it only referred to him as there were no other Togamis alive anymore.

The ash felt like glass beneath his feet.

"Yes?" he said.

"Do you understand why Haruto returns Koharu's feelings now?"

His eyes stayed forward.

“Yes, I do. Even though she can act foolishly, she is loyal and intelligent, and she has more depth to her than he first realised. Also, not only did she never give up on herself, she never gave up on Haruto despite how stubborn he could be... and when he lost everything, she still loved him the same.” The ends of Byakuya’s lips curled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “She could also make quite astute observations occasionally.”

They met each other’s eyes briefly before both looking away again.

A mystery novel... the thought of working with Touko excited him. And as he stole a glance at her while she was distracted by her thoughts, he thought that if some romance seeped into the book... well, so be it.







kamunamis

The skies look dark and gloomy outside Byakuya's window, though that much was to be expected. Towa City has not seen sun or shine ever since its descent into despair a little less than a year ago, when Byakuya killed his family in cold blood and wreaked havoc upon everyone around him.

Back then, Byakuya had worked alone. Nowadays, all of the Monokuma do his dirty bidding for him, along with the other students of Hope's Peak Academy, while he sits and watches from his throne hidden on the top floor of the academy. In the distance, one of the Monokumas sets the sidewalk ablaze, and he only watches as the flames engulf the pedestrians.

Byakuya exhales from his cigarette before putting it out and leaving it on his ashtray. He laughs to himself, his lips curling into a small smirk as he closes his eyes and sips on his wine glass. Everything is going according to plan, he muses.

Two knocks sound at his door, the telltale sound that his servant needs him for something, and Byakuya sighs deeply. He sets his wine glass down on the table next to his throne.

"Come in," he announces, and in the doorway is his loyal servant Toko.

She trembles as she approaches his throne. "Byakuya-sama..." Toko stammers.

"What do you want?" Byakuya spits out, rolling his eyes. He's never once cared for a servant or a companion of some sort, but after Toko caught onto his plan and kept following him around like a leech, latching onto his every movement, he knew he had no other choice than to anoint her as his servant, so long as she pledged loyalty to him and him only.

He's conned her into thinking her servantry will lead somewhere, that her precious Byakuya-sama will eventually feel the same way. He dangles onto her hope like a puppet on a string.

"I have your lunch ready," she mumbles, opening the lid to reveal find a dish he hadn't asked for. "I'm not hungry."

She closes the lid shut. "What do you want me to do with it then, sir?"

Her eyes are so full of admiration when she looks at him. So much admiration and adoration in those dark, melancholy grey eyes of hers. It's sickening sometimes, the way she follows him around like a stray puppy.

"Keep it refrigerated. Now, scram, I don't want to be seen with you," he tells her, even though he knows no one has followed Toko here, in the farthest corner of the academy.

His words are cold and callous. Byakuya shows no mercy or remorse toward Toko.

He wonders how she can stand to like him after all he's done to her. Every demand, every insult. Byakuya is always met with unwavering obedience and complete confidence.

But that's what makes their relationship so despairing, right? The way Toko would go to the ends of this dying earth just to please him.

Other students come up here every now and then, all of them under the naive impression that Byakuya is the headmaster and that Hope's Peak Academy is the safest place to be in this time of madness. Little do they know he's going to wipe their memories and force all of them to kill each other.

And yet, the thought of erasing Toko's memory only seems to hold him back.

What does Byakuya see in Toko anyway? There was nothing stopping him from erasing her memory back when she first found out he was the cause of all of this despair. Was it because of her intellect? Or the idea that she was hopelessly in love with him and would do whatever he asked? That he didn't want her undying loyalty to go to waste?

Byakuya shakes his head and decides that this is a problem for another day.

Barricading the entry points and all of the windows is a challenge, even with the help of Byakuya's classmates and the kids in the year above his. Hope's Peak Academy is a big school. Sometimes Byakuya wonders what it would be like if he met them in an alternate universe, if he met them in a world where the Togami conglomerate wasn't full of heartless pigs. But those are only fantasies because the real world is far, far different.

Naegi and Kirigiri are the ones to watch out for. The ones who will ask an endless number of questions at everything Byakuya does. They're observant, prone to suspicion if you leave them alone for too long.

Byakuya contemplates whether or not killing them now would be a good option, or if he should wait and see how the killing game pans out.

Maybe it would be good to have people like them in the killing game. They'll beg for their lives while they play along, watching each and every one of their friends' lives end in tragedy. He can only chuckle at the thought.

"Master?" a voice chimes from behind him. "What are you thinking about?"

Byakuya turns around to find Toko staring up at him in curiosity and awe. He sighs deeply. "Nothing. Don't worry about it," he commands.

She smiles sweetly and says, "Okay, Byakuya-sama," before walking away to help the captives lock up Hope's Peak.

He ignores the way his heart squeezes in his chest at the sight of her leaving him.

Days pass by, as they always do. Each day seems faster than the first with every day the world is in peril. Sometimes Byakuya feels like he's just waiting for it to crumble.

The thing about an apocalypse is that it's thrilling for the first few months, feeding off of everyone's fear and pain and misery and enjoying the shrill shrieks coming from every corner. After that, it feels like an endless routine, just waiting for something new to happen, and desperate to find the same sense of euphoria and thrill that welled in him when the plummet into despair first began. Watching his fellow peers lock themselves up is hardly a joy at this point.

Byakuya craves despair like an itch he can't scratch. And sure, Towa City and Hope's Peak are already despairing enough with the way he's set things up, but in the back of his mind, he thinks that maybe things can get more despairing. Maybe, if he had someone by his side, he can accomplish more. After all, celebrating things is more fun with others.

His mind paints a picture of someone he knows all too well, and he doesn't stop thinking of her as the day of his unveiling comes closer and closer.

"Fukawa," Byakuya announces when he arrives at her quarters one morning.

She sits up at the sound of the door creaking open, tossing her book aside. "Yes, master?" Toko answers, ready and alert.

"Come with me, we're going on a walk."

"Yes, master," she repeats quietly, before following Byakuya outside, dragging her feet across the floor.

It doesn't take long for her counterpart, Genocider Syo, to show up, triggered by the strong stench of blood in the air.

The pungent odor is rampant in the streets, mixed in with the smoke of the fires burning around them. The city is in a devastating state—burning buildings, the screams of civilians ringing through his ears, the smell of acid infecting the air along with the blood and smoke. Byakuya can't remember what Towa City smelled like before its downfall.

Byakuya stops in his tracks, and Syo stops when she notices.

"Cat got your tongue?" Syo asks.

"No," Byakuya snaps, irritated.

Syo groans and gives him an eye roll. "Did you want to take the hussy with you instead?" She doesn't like her counterpart very much; it's no wonder Toko tries to keep her hidden as much as possible.

"No," Byakuya grumbles.

"Then what the hell am I doing here?" she whines.

Byakuya hisses. "Shut the hell up and be patient."

He doesn't wait for her to respond before continuing to walk along the path.

"You like her, don't you? You like her plain Jane ass," Syo taunts.

They're almost back at Hope's Peak after circling around the town in silence, watching the hellfire around them increase.

Byakuya looks at her as if she's grown another head. "What are you on about?"

"You could've picked anyone to be your assistant," Syo answers. "Anyone from Class 78 or Class 77. You picked the loser who is head over heels for you."

Byakuya scoffs. So what if he picked Toko? That hardly means anything. "Tch. I picked her because she found out about my plan early on and I couldn't risk her blabbing to everyone."

"Maybe so, but you know deep down that you're still keeping her around for a reason. She'll still pledge her undying loyalty to you even after you erase her memories. You just don't want to start over, right? Otherwise, you would've enacted your killing game already."

Dammit. Byakuya knows she's right. Of course she is, she's got a knack for pushing all of his buttons. For knowing him just as well as Toko does.

Even with his apathetic nature, Toko still manages to get under Byakuya's skin. She still manages to learn everything about him.

A crushing pain sears through his leg, interrupting his thoughts.

"Shit!" he curses, immediately grabbing hold of his leg. He turns around to find a Monokuma running amok with a gun.

Somehow, even while her alter is present, Toko can sense her master being in pain.

Toko screams at the sight of Byakuya's injury. "Byakuya-sama!"

"Toko," he says through a raspy voice. "Help me."

She rushes to his side and places an arm around his shoulder as Byakuya limps back to Hope's Peak. They don't make it farther than the hallway, where Byakuya sits down as he catches his breath.

"I'll go grab some bandages and gauze," Toko announces before running away. She comes back not too long after, delicately tending to his wounds and wrapping his injury. "Are you okay, Master?"

Byakuya nods and tries to stand up. "I think so. Thank you, Toko."

It's the first time he's addressed her as anything other than Fukawa. He can't pretend he doesn't like the grin on her face as he says this.

"Stay with me," he tells her.

Toko doesn't have to think twice before agreeing.

He thinks a lot about what Syo said during their walk earlier that day.

Byakuya can't describe just how much he wants Toko to kiss him, for her to close the distance between them. He can't describe why Toko's presence is less of a bother than it had been originally. He can't describe why he feels a strange fondness for her all of a sudden.

No, he doesn't love her. But maybe there is more to their companionship than being just master and servant.

Maybe, in another life, he would.

The day of his unveiling arrives. His leg has almost fully healed by now, and everything has been barricaded. Toko stays by his side throughout all of it, and Byakuya has never been more grateful.

He knows now that he'd be nowhere without Toko's assistance. Toko nursed him back to health. She served him. She did everything in her power to make sure her master was happy, and now Byakuya must repay the favor.

"Toko," he says as soon as she enters his headquarters.

“Master?” she asks, a familiar look upon her eyes, one that Byakuya has seen every morning since Towa City’s descent into despair.

“How would you like to assist me with my despairing plan?” he asks, his lips twitching into a smirk.

Toko smiles with glee and leaps up to hug him. “Oh, Byakuya-sama! I would love to!”

She lets go of him, and Byakuya reaches for the controller sitting on his desk.

And with the push of a button, all of their memories are erased, almost exactly as planned.

Only this time, Toko is right next to him, ready to join him in his quest for despair.





ARTISTS



MORTY - any - @alumort

Hey there! I'm Morty! I love colors, so I try to sh art :D My favorite food is mashed potatoes.



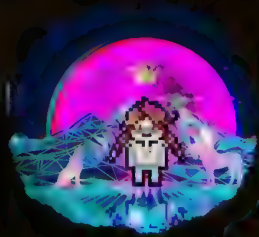
OTOMEGRANDMA - she/her - @otomegrandma

hello, i'm a digital illustrator and i draw two danganronpa characters and nothing else



JPKSUPER - they/them - @jpksuper

Hello, I am just recently into danganronpa, but I am already in love with the pairing TogaFuka. I am looking forward to contribute into the TogaFuka fandom!



KUREFANDY - she/her - @mykuredreams

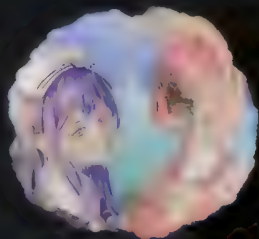
Hiiii! I'm Kure! You may know me as the artist who draws daily togafuka on my insta and twitter, I love drawing and having fun so it's very nice to be here



MALBETHBEAR - she/her - @malbethbear

Hi! I am Malbeth I started posting my art a short time ago, I love drawing and creating AUs I usually draw a lot and one of my great inspirations is ToFu

ARTISTS



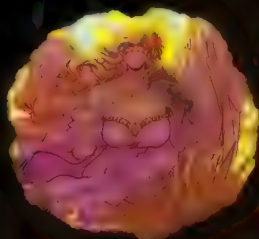
MEIA - she/her - @kirumiiryuu

Hi hi I'm Meia! I love art, anime and games and am getting back into danganronpa. I've always been interested in the relationship between Togami and Fukawa so I'm really looking forward to drawing them in this zine!



SERRAART - he/him - @serraart

I found out about Danganronpa some years ago and it soon became one of my main fandoms and Togafuka one of my OTPs from these games. I usually draw my own stuff but do fanarts from time to time too.



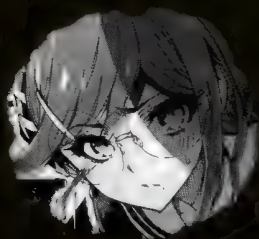
TURKEY DRAWS - she/they - @turkeydrawsthings

Hi! I'm Turkey, an artist who is a fan of wlw ships, drawing, sour candy, and a bunch of Nintendo games. I'm super excited to participate in this zine and draw for it!



ACHRANAI - she/her - @kawaiiers

I'm Rico and I loooooove Tofu since 2013. It's a great ship and I'm always happy to contribute content for it! Right now I mostly draw comics and experiment with various digital techniques.



TOKO - she/her - @11tokofukawa037

Hello. I am Toko and am a artist interested in TogaFuka. My favorite Danganronpa characters are Korekiyo and Angie.

WRITERS



ZENONAA - she/her - @zenonaa
i'm livi and i try to write... i love togafuka



POTENTIALA - she/her - @potnetiala
As a writer I always striver for having whatever hurt c
go through mean something, and not just have angst for a
sake. In regards to TogaFuka in particular.



KEI - any - @junkozurus
yooooo i'm kei, i fell in love with byakuya five months ago when
i watched the anime for the first time <3



IRISOWARI - she/they/he - @irisowari
I've been in Danganronpa hell for more than a year now. I like
Toko :p

WRITERS



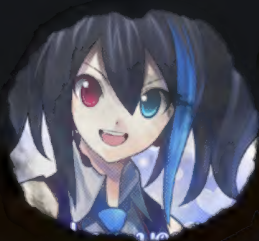
FOX - she/they/he - @herbleberble

I've always wanted to work on a ship-focused zine, and it's nice to have one for such a good pair. I love writing for DR and its fanzines, so I hope to do the duo justice.



FROG - they/them - @frogs-willtakeover

I find writing as the easiest way to express myself with characters I enjoy! I had discovered Danganronpa roughly two years ago and I have built the most experience writing for those characters.



RIRI - they/void

Working on this project has certinly been a trip, but it was also not a bad one! All of our artists and writers have been excellent to work with and such a delight to have

MODERATORS



TOKO - she/her - @11tokofukawa037

Hello! I'm mod Toko and I'm very excited to have worked on this zine.



FROG - they/them - @frogs-willtakeover

My modding experience on this zine has been excellent, and I very much enjoyed both writing and working with our contributors on this project.



NOAH - they/them - @coasterstrudels

Working on this project has certainly been a trip, but it was also not a bad one! All of our artists and writers have been excellent to work with and such a delight to have

THANK YOU

Thank you so much for your continued support on Hand In Unlovable Hand: A TogaFuka fanzine.

It was a pleasure working with all of you over the past several months to get this completed, and it is such a pleasure to view the finished project in this nice, compacted format. Our team is beyond grateful for everything you have done to support us, we couldn't do it without you!

On behalf of everyone who has worked so hard on this project, thank you!



@tofu-zine